

In today's gospel we are not told if our Lord actually said it, or whether he simply thought it: "They are like sheep without a shepherd." Modern medicine has an amazing diagnostic tool called Magnetic Resonance Imaging -- MRI. The machine provides the magnetic magic and computers translate it all into pictures sharper than X-ray. Whether Jesus thought it or said it, what we have here is the Messiah's Reaction Imagery: "They are like sheep without a shepherd."

The disciples had returned from their teaching trips through the villages. They reported to their Teacher. Their experiences must have ranged from tearful acceptances of the good news and of Jesus as the promised Messiah to outright rejection of their message and even ridicule of their persons. Now, here in this once deserted spot, they found themselves surrounded by a mixed mob of people, some hoping to see miracles, some suffering and sick, all hoping for healing, all pressing to see Jesus. And his MRI -- his Messianic Imaging? "They are like sheep without a shepherd."

For good or for ill, the shepherd-sheep analogy is a much-used biblical image. In the First Lesson (Jeremiah 23:1-6) today the prophet Jeremiah places that comparison in the mouth of "the Lord, the God of Israel." Saint Mark in today's gospel places the same figure of speech in the mouth of the Son of this Lord, the God of Israel. In Jeremiah God condemns those "shepherds who destroy and scatter" the people of God. God promises to gather the scattered sheep and to raise up shepherds who will do a good job of shepherding. In Mark Jesus sees God's task is not yet finished because the people of God were still "like sheep without a shepherd." Clearly, it is hard to get good shepherds and harder to keep them on the job.

But Psalm 23 makes the Lord himself the shepherd. And, of course, Jesus names himself the "Good Shepherd." Saint John writes that Jesus came to his own people and his own did not receive him. This is the greatest evidence that the mission of Jesus was vital; namely, to gather the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 15:25). In the Psalm the sheep knew their shepherd and realized that only with the shepherd's care could they want nothing. But what of those of us who know no shepherd?

May I say a word once more directly to those among us today who linger on the fringe of the flock, who are not ready to confess that this Lord, this Jesus Christ, "is my shepherd"? In all probability you, and most all of us, will acknowledge that we do not feel "sheepish" about our relationship with God. The imagery is not the most helpful for our age. But the vital situation God is making clear to us remains terribly important. "Sheep without a shepherd" describes all whose relationship with God has broken down or is non-existent. That is today's issue. Whether shepherds all did a poor job of shepherding in your case, or as sheep you deliberately scattered, or, poor lambs, you never seem to have had a shepherd or been introduced to God the good shepherd, all that is beside the point at this stage. But alienation from God is a terrible, tragic problem.

For us to realize what scatteredness, what shepherdlessness, what alienation from God means, we might do well to translate all this sheep-shepherd imagery into current terms. From God's point of view every created thing ought to realize that only in God do we live, move, and have being. Of course, there may be some here who do not admit the existence of God. Some of you may not concede that the concept "God" by definition makes that Being the source and the strength and

the ultimate satisfaction of life. But the fact that you are here, even if only on the fringe of Church life, suggests that you do operate at least somewhat on the premise that God exists and that this God has definite relationships with all of us human beings. Come, then, let us reason together in contemporary terms.

Imagine one of those huge trailer trucks which carry six or seven new cars from the factory to your auto dealer's showroom. Those cars were made to be your helper, your servant. You arrive to make one your own, say the red convertible. You are ready to love, honor, and polish it, only to discover that it has this prejudice against gasoline. "I think it stinks. It may cause cancer. One spark and it might explode all over me." What to do? You could abandon it. You could try to reason with it. Beat on it, perhaps.

Now see this Jesus crossing the lake in a boat and coming to a deserted place with his disciples. And whom does he meet? Us. Us without a clue about what turns us over. Us with an aversion to the one thing which gives us life, liberty, and happiness. What is Jesus to do? In him dwells all wisdom and knowledge. By him all things were made. He himself, made as a man, as human as you and I, with arms, legs, organs, brains. The only thing we have he doesn't have is sin. Here he arrives, right off the boat, and discovers us. Some of us have the sheep's biggest problem -- not recognizing the shepherd. Some of us refuse to acknowledge our servanthood. Some scorn or ridicule the theory that gasoline makes the car go round. What did he do then? And now? "He began to teach them many things." What can we learn?

Today's Second Lesson (Ephesians 2:13-22) spells out a great deal of the "many things" Jesus revealed. He surely did not try to teach all of this, then, to those people. God has taught much of this to many of you -- and you will rejoice to hear it all anew. But even if some of you are not all that ready to hear all the details or the mechanics of what Jesus Christ has accomplished for this world, at least focus on what a great guy Jesus is. That was the most astounding of the many things he must have taught them -- that God, almighty, omnipotent God, cares, and not only deeply cares, but, truly, God is present, God is here. His very being there said, "You don't want to miss out on this. You can know God and you can have God's love and care and you can find meaning and purpose in life. Restless? Of course you are -- until you who were made by God, for God, find rest in God." "Come unto me," Jesus said, "and you will find rest!"

He taught them many things. Without God in the world you are without hope. But now God, coming to us in the flesh-and-blood Jesus Christ, has brought us near. God created this "nearness" by being near. "He is our peace!" Much of Ephesians 2:13-22 describes how God-in-Christ has broken down the wall which divided Gentiles and Jews. But it also describes how the wall separating us from God has been broken down, and how God deeply desires to destroy the wall which still divides your heart from God's heart. Hear it that way. Hear more of the many things our Lord taught.

In his flesh-and-blood presence God has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us and God. To know God-in-Christ is to love God. He has abolished the law which said that if you sin you die. Instead he died. God-in-Christ died and now, by his grace, even though you sin, you are forgiven. God has reconciled all of us to God through the cross, "putting to death that hostility through it." So he came and proclaimed peace -- proclaims now -- peace to you who were far off and to you who are near. Through him all of us have access in one Spirit to the

Father. "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."

It's accomplished. It's done. You are in. Accept it! Believe it! Be glad about it! There were many things Jesus did not teach that crowd then. He hadn't yet done many of the things he had come to do. Much of his teaching, all of his dying, his triumphant resurrection, are still in the future. But the essence of it all was there -- for he was there. God was in Christ loving; God was in Christ reconciling the world. And by Messianic Imagery Jesus made that clear. You bring your sick loved one on a mat to him in some marketplace and he touches the one you love and he heals your child, your wife, your husband. Do you doubt that God has come near, that God loves? Of course, God has not done anything like that for many of you, and many of you have asked time and time again. But Jesus did not heal everyone then, and he didn't even touch China or England, not to mention North America. God didn't even spare the Beloved Son the evil which sin has brought down upon us all. But when God delivered up that Son of God for us it has become certain that nothing like death nor illness nor things present nor things to come can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!

Well. Start your motors. Obviously Jesus would not have tried the automobile-gasoline analogy for that crowd. But he did work with the food analogy. He taught that we could not live on bread alone, but he fed that whole bunch after his sermon. And our Lord is prepared to do the food bit anew for us here. He takes this bread and promises, "My body." He takes this wine and promises, "My blood." And always repeats his promise, "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Do this in remembrance, for the remembrance, of him. And run with it!

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“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want,” if people only know one psalm, that psalm is Psalm 23, today’s responsorial psalm. Today, I would like to lead you in a reflection on this psalm.

The Lord is my shepherd. God wants to direct our lives. Jesus felt so bad for the people in today's Gospel because they had no one to shepherd them. He mourns also for us. The world can be a confusing place. Life can be confusing. Governments like those mentioned in the first reading, often demand that people violate their consciences for what they claim in the greater good. Historically, this has always resulted in the people participating in hidden, immoral agendas. We witnessed this happening the last century with the two extremes of fascism and communism. Most of the people of Germany did not have full knowledge of what the Nazis were doing to the Jews and others in the concentration camps. But they had a share of the guilt because in the name of national pride, they allowed bad shepherds to guide them. At the same time, there were good shepherds in Germany, people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who stood up for truth and died leading people to the Lord.

What should we do when we are confronted with what is presented as a small moral sacrifice for what is claimed to be a greater national good? This is not an easy question, particularly because we are invested in our country. We love America. But if we truly love our country, we need to shepherd it in ways that are just and merciful. We ourselves need a shepherd to guide us. We have one. The Lord is our shepherd. We should follow God. Right is right and wrong is wrong. We have to let God direct our lives, not politicians. This will protect us from taking the steps that would lead to great evil.

I shall not want. When I was a child, I thought that it is strange to say that I didn’t want God to be my shepherd. No, the phrase means that I will want for nothing. God provides that which we really need in life: a reason for being alive. Following our conscience leads us to rest in Christ, at peace with God and at peace with ourselves. People are looking for peace. The world provides stress. God provides rest. The psalm talks about restful waters. We can look at water for hours. From babbling brooks to the great oceans, it is so peaceful to look at the water. We let go of our stress. We just focus on the beauty before us. The psalm speaks about restful waters where God leads us. We can help others find those restful waters by encouraging them to be who they were meant to be, unique reflections of the image and likeness of God. There is peace in being true to ourselves.

He restores our souls. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that we should be perfect as His Heavenly Father is Perfect. But how can we be perfect? We are human. We are frail. Sometimes people carry such guilt that they give up on themselves, on religion and even on God. We can be good shepherds for them. We can let them know that what the Lord is saying is that we should be sincere, truthful to our best selves. That is what the word that is used in the Sermon on the Mount really means. Be sincere as my heavenly Father is sincere. When our external actions reflect our inner beings, we are at one with God and with ourselves. We can help others find integrity in their lives by living as sincere people. Our souls can be restored

to God's original purpose for our creation. Then we and they will be at peace. When we are at peace with ourselves and with our God, we want for nothing.

And though I walk through the valley of death, I fear no evil. Yes there are continual challenges in life. But the present life is just a part of the totality of our lives. Here, we are in the valley of death. We are mortal. We become sick and die. Worse, our loved ones die. Still, through all the pain, the suffering and the sorrow, we ultimately trust in God. *You are with me*, the Psalm proclaims. He is. He guides us with His rod and staff. He gives us gentle shoves, and sometimes not so gentle shoves. But we are comforted with knowing that whatever happens, the Lord is in charge. He will take care of us. In fact, even when others attack us for our devotion to Him, when others mock us for our faith, even when other Catholics deride us for our determination to live what we profess, God will win out. We can shepherd others to recognize this present reality: God always wins. Jesus Christ is the Victor. Those who oppose us because we live our faith will eventually witness God's caring for us at the banquet of His Love. *He sets a table before me in the face of my foes.*

Psalm 23 ends with the great promise: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.* If we have the courage to live united to the Lord, we will experience his goodness and kindness in this life and union with Him in the next life.

The world needs good shepherds, and the world needs the Good Shepherd. Jesus was with His disciples when He felt the hurt of so many people without shepherds. He sent the disciples to care for his people, to shepherd them. The Lord still has pity on those in pain. Now we are the disciples. He sends us to bring healing, and mercy, and goodness and truth to the world.

We can be and we must be good shepherds.

III DeSiano

We have all become very sensitive about our surroundings, especially fearing to go someplace strange or different. Two years ago we might enter a hotel room with a smile, wondering how big the TV screen might be; now we enter wondering if they have sanitized the room enough or if we will end up bringing a deadly virus to someone else because someone didn't clean enough. All of this reminds me of an ironic movie called "The Accidental Tourist," in which the protagonist, a travel editor, tries to make every hotel room he stays in look exactly the same. It's as if he never left home. He always wants those things that make him feel self-assured surrounding him in the room.

Jesus is not into accidental tourism in the Gospel today; Jesus is into mission. Rather than having his apostles hang out and feel comfortable, Jesus is sending them out to do the very things that he himself has done. It's as if a child went to swimming lessons and now it's time to swim without the teacher's support. "You have seen my ministry; now do it yourself." Amos wanted to stay home, as the first reading shows, but God gave him a mission bigger than his flock and his sycamore trees.

Jesus knows this will not be easy because we are most comfortable staying in our own zone. He advises them to travel very lightly—not to bring extra things or extra money. He wants them to go out in great simplicity so that they will be forced to deal with others—to meet them, to engage with them, to depend on them for food and beddings, and to proclaim the Kingdom of God to them.

In other words, Jesus sends them out in great simplicity and he gives them a very simple message: they were to preach repentance, that is, a new way of seeing things because God was active in their lives. Their deeds were to bring healing and victory over the very forces that we think hold us back: cast out demons and anoint the sick to cure them. The demons are the illnesses of our spirits which distort and limit them; our spirits need healing even more than our bodies.

He also teaches them not to worry about failure. Some people will hear their voices and be unmoved; but our mission is to speak God's message, to do the deeds that show God's presence, and trust that those who are ready will be able to see this. The ones who hear you will become part of a community of people who have been called and chosen to experience God in such a way that he want to spread that experience to others.

As believers we may look stranger and stranger to people around us. This may make us want to crawl in a shell and play safe. But Jesus does not call us to crawl into shells. He calls us to be apostles and ambassadors of his healing and grace. He knows we are cautious. "Trust me," he says. "I am always with you."

Perhaps each one of us can think of someone who needs a word of healing or consolation. After what we've been through, that might include just about everyone! But, for now, just think of one person and realize that God is sending you to that troubled heart. Start with that hurt, focus on God's healing presence, and let the Kingdom shine through you.

Now if we all did that, what might the impact be?