

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Jul 19th 2015

Jeremiah's oracle rebukes the failed leadership of Israel's and Judah's kings in the image of shepherds who have failed in their role as caretakers of their flocks, a role entailing leading, feeding and protection. The word of the Lord promises a special shepherd-king who will carry out the role with the care the Father intended. We recognize this promise as pointing to the Messiah, which Jesus of Nazareth finally fulfills in an unexpected way—that is, not as a political king but as a leader who has been crucified and is raised from the dead.

When we hear the reading from the Gospel of Mark, we recognize that Jesus is acting like a shepherd when his twelve apostles return from their first mission, no doubt exhausted, and he invites them to come away to a deserted place and rest. Shepherds do that with their flock. And we can recognize in this invitation a care that is not simply a matter of healthy living but a human practice that is rooted in the Jewish practice of Sabbath, resting in a way which acknowledges that our labors are not simply our project but a participation in the work of our creating and redeeming Lord.

And when we hear, “When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd . . .” we might be thinking, “O yes, here comes the feeding of the five thousand.” But no, the first thing that this shepherd does is to “teach them many things.” How is teaching an act of shepherding? Well, a shepherd leads. And when the flock is a group of human beings, leadership is especially expressed in teaching, for one of the deepest of human hungers is a way of understanding one's place in the world and the proper way to live out one's place among all the relationships involved in living—relationships with God, other human beings, other living things, and the Earth itself.

Just now, the one taking Jesus' role as the shepherd of the flock of the Catholic Church is Pope Francis. He has just presented us — along with the rest of the world—a powerful teaching precisely about our place as human beings who as a species are connected with one another and every other living thing on a planet that has become very vulnerable to the way we have been living with and on it, especially during the past century and a half since the industrial revolution. He has named this teaching *Laudato Si'* (“Praised Be”), *On the Care of Our Common Home*. While the encyclical teaches some hard truths regarding our exploitation of the gifts of the Earth and unknowing complicity and going along with a way of life that has meant suffering for the poor and excluded among our human family, the teaching is full of insight and hope. It is a worldview that Pope Francis calls “integral ecology” that can feed our hunger for wisdom and can provide a way of adapting to and mitigating the effects of human-induced climate change. Pope Francis has spread a table for us in the midst of a “desert place.” Set down to the feast of this teaching and be surprised by the hospitality you find when you rest there.

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