

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME — B

READING I Jer 23:1-6
READING II Eph 2:13-18
GOSPEL Mk 6:30-34

Jer 21:11-23:8 is a tract on kings in the book of Jeremiah. 23:1-6 is concerned with King Zedekiah (597-586 B.C.). Historically he was a mere puppet in the hands of his advisors. (23:5 should read "legitimate shoot"— there is a question of Zedekiah's claim to the throne.) His vacillation and rebellion precipitated the fall of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah begins his judgment with a woe: A literary form which originated in the funeral celebration. The prophet tolls the death knell for Zedekiah and his cohorts. They have not been true shepherds. (In the ancient Near East, "shepherd" was a common title for a king.) These leaders have provided for themselves, not others, and have misled the people. However, God, the true shepherd, will intervene and will bring home those already in exile and those about to be exiled. He also states that God will raise up a Davidic king worthy of the name. That is, someone who is genuinely interested in his subjects. Justice and honesty will be the hallmark of his governing. He will be "righteous," meaning, he will provide for others.

What has Jesus done to resolve the Jewish-Gentile question? The author of Ephesians addresses this by stating that Jesus' self-giving has broken down the wall separating Jews and Gentiles (those "who once were far off"). In the Second Temple there was just such a wall which partitioned Jews and Gentiles and forbade access (v 18), under penalty of death, to the Gentiles. In Jesus it was not a question of joining but of creating. The cross of Jesus was the rite of passage for a new humanity. As a result, all have access to the Father through the Son in the Spirit. The humanity of Jesus has resolved the Jewish-Gentile question by creating a new humanity.

Mk 6:30-34 is a prelude to the account of the feeding of the five thousand which follows in vv. 35-44. It also introduces John's Bread of Life Discourse which begins next week and continues for the next five. The missionaries have returned and offer an account of their activities. Jesus judges that they need a rest after this period of ministry. With this, Mark is preparing for the shepherd theme in v 34. In Ez 34:15 and Ps 23:2 the shepherd provides rest for his sheep. Mark then goes on to paint a vivid picture of the converging groups who travel on foot to meet Jesus. He then portrays Jesus' reaction as one of great compassion for the people. His description of sheep without a shepherd may stem from such texts as 1 Kgs 22:17 and Ez 34:5. To offer proper direction and subsequent hope, Jesus undertakes the pastoral role of teaching.

Good leaders ask the right questions. Because leaders are human, they tend to ask: What's in it for me? They miss the leading question: What's in it for you? Because leaders are weak, they are prone to ask: What can you do for me? They miss the leading question: What can I do for you? Because leaders are tempted, they are likely to ask: How can you serve me? They miss the leading question: How can I serve you? Good leaders ask the right questions.

According to Jeremiah, the leaders in his day took good care of themselves. They did not ask: What's in it for the sheep (the people)? What can we do for them? Instead, they scattered and drove the sheep away. For Jeremiah, the leaders asked the wrong questions and therefore God himself was forced to intervene. God would therefore raise up a Davidic prince who would understand the implications of leadership: he would govern wisely and do what is just. For the prophet, good leaders ask the right questions.

According to Mark, Jesus was a shepherd who grasped the meaning of leadership. When he saw the vast crowd, he immediately identified them as sheep without a shepherd. His action of teaching implied the following questions: What's in it for the sheep? What can I do for them? At the same time, his action is designed by Mark to teach the disciples to identify service with leadership. In Mark, good leaders ask the right questions.

Parents who identify in terms of their family's needs ask the right questions. Employers who look to the needs of their employees pose the right questions. Church and civil leaders who are concerned about the common good search out the right questions. Teachers who generously give their time and persons to their students pursue the right questions. All such people see their positions in terms of others. They maintain that good leaders ask the right questions.

Eucharist also asks leading questions: For whom is this bread? For whom is this wine? Eucharist replies that it is always for others. By focusing on the deathstyle of Jesus, the leader par excellence, Eucharist urges the community to make the words of institution their model for leadership. Eucharist, too, announces that good leaders ask the right questions.