

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR B)

July 18, 2021

Jeremiah 23:1–6 • Ephesians 2:13–18 • Mark 6:30–34

I.

This past week brought with it one of the parish's summer highlights: Vacation Bible School.

Approximately 40 children, from age 4 to 5th grade, took part, and some 20 volunteers, both young people and adults, assisted.

The enthusiasm around the various activities reverberated throughout the building.

It was nice to have that buzz in the parish office during the week.

Looking out my office window, I could see the game area across the street.

And as I walked by the parish hall,
I saw different groups of children enjoying a snack.

It seemed to be a glimpse of the scene in today's Gospel:

“People were coming and going in great numbers...
They hastened there on foot from all the towns.”

And most importantly:

“[Jesus] began to teach them many things.”

II.

The Church is part of Christ and cannot be separated from him.

The Church is Christ's Body and the vessel of his presence in the world.

As St. Joan of Arc (ca. 1412–1431) said at her trial,

“About Jesus Christ and the Church,
I simply know they’re just one thing,
and we shouldn’t complicate the matter”
(Quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 795).

The Church continues Jesus’ mission.

Or to put it another way,
Christ continues his mission through the Church.

The work of Christ and the Church is often summarized in three categories:
(1) shepherding; (2) teaching; and (3) sanctifying, which means “to make holy.”

There’s a beautiful depiction of these works in two stained-glass windows
in the ambulatory (which is walkway at the back of the sanctuary).

Those windows were installed on the occasion of the 25th anniversary
of the Cathedral’s dedication, in 1931:

1. Christ the Teacher / Christ the Redeemer
2. Christ the Priest (sanctifying role) / Christ the Shepherd

The windows capture what Jesus does in today’s Gospel:

“When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd,
his heart was moved with pity for them,
for they were like sheep without a **shepherd**;
and he began to **teach** them many things.”

(And we’ll see next Sunday that Christ also feeds the multitudes
by multiplying the loaves and fishes—
a prefiguration of the Eucharist, which sanctifies.)

Christ provides for the people’s needs;
he teaches, guides, and nourishes them.

The whole Church carries out this same work of teaching, guiding, and sanctifying.

On a local level, Vacation Bible School bears witness to that endeavor.

Just as all of us participate in that threefold work,
so each of us is also the recipient of teaching, guidance, and sanctification.

Because the opportunities and challenges we face change as we go through life.

There is always something that influences and guides a person;
often it's the surrounding culture.

Christ offers us a different kind of life—
a sharing in his own life with God.

Today's readings make the point that Christ is the good shepherd of Israel;
he nourishes the people's spiritual hunger.

And that hunger is just as real as physical hunger—
and just as important.

Christianity makes a bold claim:
Christ is more than just a teacher, role model, or wise man;
he is the way into the heart of God because he is both God and man.

Christ is the reason for our lives.

So, being a Christian—being a Catholic—is not just a part of our lives;
it's the reason why we are here, on this earth.

To quote the Second Vatican Council,

“Christ... by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love,
fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. ...
By his incarnation
the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every man. ...
By suffering for us... he blazed a trail, and if we follow it,
life and death are made holy and take on a new meaning”
(*Gaudium et spes*, no. 22).

That's the kind of teacher, shepherd, and priest that Christ is;
he “blazes” a trail for us.

He guides us with mercy, compassion, and truth,
and he stands ready to reconcile us whenever we veer off the path.

III.

Often times, when it comes to the Church's stance on a moral topic,
this teaching is presented in terms of commands:
"The Church allows this but prohibits that."

I'm thinking of topics like human sexuality, war, and social justice.

Frequently, we don't recognize that these teachings derive from Christ's teaching,
and they are developed and enunciated through the working of the Holy Spirit,
which Christ poured out upon his followers, the Church.

When we see that there is a real person behind those teachings—
Christ the Good Shepherd—
then we are motivated and strengthened to live them out.

The shepherd and teacher comes first;
his teaching takes place within the relationship he establishes with us.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI put it memorably when he wrote that,

"Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea,
but the encounter with an event, a person,
which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction"
(*Deus caritas est*, no. 2).

Benedict went on to explain that the response to this encounter
with the person of Christ is the commandment to love.

However, this commandment to love
"is longer a mere 'command';
it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us" (no. 2).

IV.

"When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd,
his heart was moved with pity for them,
for they were like sheep without a shepherd;
and he began to **teach** them many things."

Throughout our lives—wherever we are—
Christ has a way of disembarking along the shore.

His heart—what we honor as his Most Sacred Heart—
is moved with loving concern for us.

Christ teaches us, guides us, and makes us holy.

Christ gives us new life—his own life with God.