

THEY WERE LIKE SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD - Biblical Commentary by Fr. Alberto Maggi OSM

Mk 6.30-34

The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught.

He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat. So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place.

People saw them leaving and many came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them.

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.

This is the one and only time we find the term 'apostle' in Mark's Gospel, which is not representing a title, a position. It represents a role: it means 'envoy'. When disciples are "sent out" they become 'apostles'.

Well then, these apostles, the disciples, "*gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught*". But Jesus didn't entitle them to teach and all what they did was not in line with the reasons why he sent them out. They've carried out and taught and Jesus doesn't seem happy with their reporting; in fact he says "*Come away by yourselves*". 'By yourselves' is a technical expression which is always used by evangelists – we find it many times not only in Mark, but also in others authors of Gospels – in order to indicate incomprehension and hostility or even opposition to Jesus.

Every time Jesus takes them aside it means there's incomprehension or hostility to his message. In this case disciples didn't carry out what Jesus asked them to and started teaching – Jesus never authorized them to teach. In Greek, there's a difference between 'teaching' and 'preaching'. Teaching means utilizing the ancient categories of the Old Testament in order to proclaim the new and this will be a kind of role that Jesus will keep for himself. Jesus is the only one who knows what must be kept from ancients in order to begin the Kingdom. Jesus doesn't authorize them to teach, he sends them out to preach. Preaching means proclaiming through new categories.

On the contrary they used to teach, they used the expressions of Old Testament and achieved very confusing results. Actually, the evangelist writes *“people were coming and going in great numbers”*. Maybe these disciples proclaimed a nationalist Messiah and this was causing great enthusiasm. While Jesus in the synagogue of his village was welcome with skepticism, disciples’ preaching is welcome with enthusiasm; this means that Jesus’ line was different from the one of disciples.

“So”, the evangelist writes, *“they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place”*. Jesus needs to separate them from the crowd because they raised a false expectation, the one of a triumphant and winning Messiah.

It is worth noting this particular *“he disembarked”* – the evangelist should have been written ‘they disembarked’; No, disciples stayed on the boat, Jesus spaced them out from the crowd. *“He saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them”*. This expression ‘to be moved with pity’ is a technical one used both in the Old and New Testament that is only used as referred to God. Men have mercy, God is the one and only who is moved with pity. ‘Pity’ is not a feeling; it is a divine action by which one restores the life of those who lost it.

In the Old Testament it is exclusively reserved to God, in the New Testament is used both for God and for Jesus. Well, Jesus was moved with pity for *“they were like sheep without a shepherd”*. Moses had required that always a shepherd be present with people in order not to let them disperse. But people is like ‘sheep without a shepherd’; they had many shepherds, maybe they had too many, but they didn’t care about them, they didn’t act for their sake, they only behaved for self-interest. They didn’t take care about people health, people life, they just looked after their privileges; they didn’t serve the sheep, but ruled over it.

Facing this situation, which was already foretold by prophets, Jesus holds the role of shepherd. From now on he will be the true shepherd of Israel. *“He began to teach them many things”*; he doesn’t teach doctrines to rule over people but, as we will see, he will turn himself into bread, into a vital communication which will allow them to live.