

THEY WERE LIKE SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD
Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Mark 6,30-34

The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.

In Mark's gospel, chapter 6, verse 30, the word 'apostles' appears for the first and only time. 'Apostles' does not indicate a function, but an assignment. Jesus in verse 7 sent them out. The verb 'to send' in the Greek language is 'apostello' from which comes the word apostles.

So, "*The apostles returned...*" also here it is important to see the choice of the verb used by the evangelist.

So, "*The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught.*", but Jesus had not authorized them to teach. In Mark's gospel it distinguishes very clearly between the two activities and the two verbs: the verb to teach means to announce the kingdom starting from the Old Testament, this is exclusive of Jesus when he speaks for the Jews, when he speaks to mixed crowds he does not use this verb; while for the disciples the evangelist had said "...*he appointed twelve so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach.*" (Mark 3,14) The verb to preach means to announce the Kingdom without necessarily being based on the Old Testament.

Well, here the twelve had taught, but Jesus had not authorized them and his reaction is negative: "*And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves..."*" It is the second time that in Mark's gospel that this phrase appears this key of "by yourselves" that is always addressed to the disciples and is always negative and indicates incomprehension. Therefore there is a misunderstanding between Jesus and this group "*...by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.*"

Jesus sees these disciples are full of enthusiasm and he asks them to calm themselves, why? "*For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.*" Jesus' failure in the synagogue in Nazareth, a total fiasco, a failure that contrasts with the success of the apostles preaching, evidently this preaching of the apostles is not the same as Jesus'. "*And they went away in the boat to a desolate place...*" the evangelist underlines again "*...by themselves.*" But the enthusiasm is great, "*Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns.*" the town meaning a place where there is a synagogue, therefore the result of the teaching in the synagogue "*... and got there ahead of them.*"

"*When he went ashore...*" strangely only Jesus left the boat. He separates himself from his disciples, they are not ready yet to enter in contact with the people because they are animated by their desires of religious success, nationalist with a figure of a Messiah that does not correspond to Jesus. So, Jesus leaves the boat alone, "*... he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion.*" compassion is a divine attitude with which one communicates life to those who do not have life "*... on them,*" Here there is a quote from the Book of Numbers, when Moses had asked the Lord to put

leaders for the people so that they are not like sheep that have no shepherd, sheep without a shepherd are scattered. .So it is a lamentation of Jesus that recalls the warning that is already present in the prophet Jeremiah “*Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!*”(Jeremiah 2, 1) or that of Ezekiel “ *So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered;*” (Ezekiel 34,5) Why does Jesus have compassion for these people? “*..because they were like sheep without a shepherd*” Actually they have shepherds, they have far too many, only they think for themselves, not in the interests of the people. So Jesus “*... began to teach them ..*”and Jesus assumes himself the role of shepherd, but not with the doctrine to dominate the people, but, as the Gospel narration will then follow, giving bread. Jesus’ teaching is food that communicates life, that rebuilds and enriches life.