



***Sixteenth Sunday Ordinary Time 2006***

***Jeremiah 23: 1-6 Ephesians 2:13-16 Mark 6:30-34***

Today's Gospel tells of the return of the disciples from their ministry.

It's a very warm story, which suggests more than it says. The "ones sent" return to Jesus. Because they took their mission from Jesus, they return to Jesus to report on what had happened. The two elements of Jesus' mission, actions and teachings are mentioned.

Jesus then invites them to a quiet place for rest. We are told that there was a lot of comings and goings. Not a good place for reflection on the missionary experience. The next two verses provide a prelude to the story which follows. It explains how a crowd appeared in the wilderness.

There is an idyllic quality about the interlude with Jesus and the disciples, as if we are being offered a model of how to do the ministry of evangelist. It is in strong contrast to the reading from the prophet, Jeremiah. Here we have a warning to those who take on the role of representing God before the people. In Christian terms, this means all the baptised especially those with formal leadership roles.

The sins, denounced by Jeremiah, are those of misleading and scattering the people of God. The crime is that of driving people away, the very opposite of the concept of gathering or assembly.

The cry, "You have not cared for them", is countered by God's compassionate response, "they need no longer fear and tremble".

The people of God are living in spiritual exile because of the actions of the very people who have taken on the role of shepherd. These words come from about five hundred years before the common era but they have a certain familiarity about them. How do we hear these words today? There are many today who take upon themselves the voice of God and make a mockery of God's message.

Fear is still being used as a weapon and, instead of building community founded on inclusiveness, some are deciding who should or should not be included. Some appeal to law to defend their attitudes. As the laws are made by people, for people, they are not an end in themselves and need to be challenged when they cut across the forgiveness and generosity of God.

God still needs people who will bring back the scattered from the "foreign lands" to which they were driven. To do this requires courage especially as a rigidly fundamentalist spirit seems to be taking hold in places.

The letter to the Ephesians underlines the importance of Christ as builder of a new body. Speaking of the barrier that used to exist between Jew and Gentile, we are told

that it is Christ who breaks it down. Christ is peace, not the temporary cessation of hostilities, but the way unity can be achieved.

Through his actions and words, Christ 'abolished the law with its commands and precepts" to create something new. Two become one through the process of reconciling both to God.

This image suggests that unity is promoted by shifting the focus from the differences between ourself and the "other" (whether the "other" is person, race, gender, or religion) to that which we hold in common, our common humanity made holy in God.

Through Jesus we heard Good News of peace. Through Jesus we all have access in the one Spirit to God who calls us into the one household.

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