

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading: (Jeremiah 23.1-6)

The Lord will shepherd Israel

The choice of this reading looks towards the gospel. It is quite unlike so many passages in Jeremiah, when he was obliged to prophesy doom and disaster for Israel. As well a doom for the current shepherds of the people, it foretells a time when the Lord himself will shepherd his people through his own shepherds, a king in the line of David. The promise shimmers between God as himself the shepherd and his representative being the shepherd. The exile in Babylon must still intervene, but it will give way to the reign of 'The-Lord-is-our-Saving-Justice'. This name is roughly equivalent to the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus, for the Kingship of God is a Kingship of God's justice and salvation.

God's 'justice' is not like human justice, which consists in observance of and obedience to the law, whether it be the Jewish law or civil law. God's justice consists in fidelity to his promises, the promises made originally to Abraham, and repeated to Moses and David, the repeatedly renewed covenant, the promise of patronage and protection, if only they will put their trust in the Lord. This is what makes it a saving justice, the hope of Israel, fulfilled in Jesus.

Question:

In what way is God's 'justice' or 'righteousness' a saving justice?

Second reading: (Ephesians 2.13-18)

The Unity of Believers

The Letter to the Ephesians celebrates the unity of the Church, returning again and again to this subject. In this passage, the 'you that used to be so far off' denotes the gentiles, and the 'us' the Jews. The two groups of Christians, sprung from Jews and gentiles, which formerly were so much at loggerheads, are united by the blood of Christ and the single Spirit to form the single new man which is Christ's Body, the Church.

This particular division between believers is no longer the prime worry in our problem of disunity, for the scandal of disunity within Christendom becomes more acute as the proportion of Christians in the world population shrinks.

However, the uniting of these two groups brings to mind that Christ won salvation for all the world. In some mysterious way, all who are saved are saved by Christ, even if they are not explicitly aware of this. One great theologian called such people 'anonymous Christians'. One wonders whether believers who seek the truth in Buddhism and Islam would be happy to be so described! Is it enough that they should profess Christ's values and be aware of our human inadequacy to save ourselves?

Question:

Do you find that the Church is a source of peace? How could this be improved?

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Gospel:

(Mark 6. 30-44)

The Feeding of the Five Thousand

This account introduces a series of six Sunday gospels on the Eucharist. As the gospel of Mark (used in Year B) is too short to provide readings for the whole year, it is after this account of the Feeding in Mark that the Church moves on to insert five Sundays of John's Bread of Life Discourse.

The story can be read on several levels. It is a foretaste of the Eucharist, the disciples gathered round Jesus as the new Israel (12 baskets for the 12 tribes) for a fully satisfying meal, the messianic banquet. Jesus is the good shepherd who feeds his flock, according to Psalm 23, on the green pastures beside the restful waters of the Lake of Galilee. Jesus is the prophet like Moses who provides manna for his people in the desert, or more exactly like Elisha in 2 Kings 4 (next Sunday's first reading). The story is recounted in terms that deliberately recall these and other biblical scenes, concentrating more on the meaning than on the historical facts. There must, of course, have been a wonderful feeding at the base of the story, but it is difficult to re-establish exactly what this was.

Question:

Would you say this meal was a Eucharist or not?
