

## Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The emphasis in the Gospel text this Sunday on Jesus and his disciples going by themselves to an out-of-way place for prayer and rest. It is something that Christians throughout the ages have done, taking a break from the routine to enter more fully into the all-important work of dwelling more consciously in the presence of the Lord.

Some authors of Christian spirituality have referred to this “pause that refreshes” as the “practice of the presence of God,” or “the sacrament of the present moment.” The idea is clear: we can better meet the Lord in the here and now if we allow God to go to work within us, especially when we “quiet down” and are receptive to the love of Christ, who gathers us together.

Whatever we call the process, it is an important work for followers of the Lord, to take up what Jesus says: “Come by yourselves to an out-of-the-way place and rest a little.” In so doing we learn from the Lord, who is “meek and humble of heart,” that we have been loved into being and are precious in God’s sight, all of us, the good and the not so good, the receptive and the much less so, capable of experiencing the presence and work of God in our lives.

The Gospel passage this Sunday stresses, along with resting in the Lord, that we see in Jesus a compassionate shepherd, extending help to his people who are like “sheep without a shepherd.” The image is one of order under God’s care, whereas chaos prevails when the shepherd is absent.

This idea has through the centuries been used as a basis for the need of contemplative prayer, as it has come to be called, that is, resting in the company of the Lord, for all those actively engaged in building up the Kingdom of God, including monks, but all who follow Christ.

In the Gospel narrative the going “apart” to a “lonely place” with Jesus forms the background for the miraculous feeding of the multitudes. The significance of this miracle extends back to the Old Testament, where God chose to feed his people in the wilderness during the great and saving event of the Exodus from Egypt into the Promised Land.

In Jesus, the ancient promise of God to appoint a new shepherd for his people is realized. The new shepherd is to go out and come in at the head of the people, leading them out and bringing them back, imagery that is describing the responsibilities of a good shepherd who tend his flock carefully.

The mission of Jesus is in contrast with the neglectful shepherds of earlier times, described in the reading from Jeremiah the Prophet this Sunday. Neglecting their duty, the flock is scattered, but God will nonetheless send a shoot from King David’s stock, “a righteous branch,” under whose care justice and righteousness will flourish. This Messianic prophecy is perfectly realized in the person of Christ the Redeemer.

The notion of Christ as universal bearer of salvation is taken up by Saint Paul in the Letter to the Ephesians, the second lesson for Mass this Sunday. There we hear of those who

were once far off being brought near in the blood of Christ, an image of the crucifixion. To be brought near is equivalent to being enrolled in the community of believers. For Christians this is especially realized in the sacrament of Baptism.

Christ and no one else is the source of our peace. The peace that Christ brings and gives is not simply the absence of human hostility nor merely well-being, happiness, or feeling good. Christ's peace, which comes through the Holy Spirit, is all-pervasive and relates especially to the fullness of God's presence, leading us out of darkness into his eternal light, that is, salvation. This is a new creation in which all are invited to participate.

In the work of salvation, Christ has not only restored peace and reconciled humans to God, but given us all access to the Almighty. There could be no better gift as we move through life toward our heavenly homeland.