Sunday 16. 2

Both our first reading today from Jeremiah and our Gospel from Mark speak of shepherds, and our first glance at them reveals a contrast. The reading from Jeremiah speaks of bad shepherds. Of course it is clear to us that Jeremiah was not speaking of actual shepherds but rather of the kings of his days, because in Israel at that time a good king was supposed to be like a good shepherd who cared for his flock. We can see that connection between shepherds and kings in the most famous king of Israel, David, for he was a shepherd before he became king. So this first reading from Jeremiah is a protest against bad kings, against a corrupt government.

The Gospel, on the other hand, portrays Jesus as one who acts the way a good shepherd or good king would act. We have that sentence which we should burn into our memories: “When he 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.” Note that Jesus begins to teach them. To teach someone is to feed that person intellectually and emotionally. But Jesus is also going to feed them. That comes next in this gospel

text. Thus he provides for both the material and spiritual needs of the vast crowd.

Our own reaction to a crowd is not always the same as that of the Lord's. Our hearts are not always moved with pity for the people in a crowd even if and when they seem to us to be like sheep without a shepherd. In a city when we are in a crowd, we are afraid of being mugged. And often when we are not preoccupied by our fear, we look at these people with a mild—or perhaps even strong—negative feeling. It may not be hatred or contempt, but it is often a lack of sympathy, a lack of concern for them. If that is the case with us, then we are off base as followers of Jesus, for he was moved with pity when confronted with such a situation. Therefore, when we have this experience, we should recall this scene from the Gospel and try to look with the eyes and heart of the Lord. In fact, our response to a crowd should be nothing but an extension of the response we attempt to have to all the people who make up our lives. We should approach all people, from spouse to stranger, with the same basic attitude, an attitude of compassion. In short, our lives should be lives of shepherding. We are there to help each other, and all of us need help. We are all at times lost. Therefore we should shepherd each other.

Perhaps you have heard this before, but it seems to me that at times our Catholic training has been deficient in teaching us to have pity on the crowd. We were taught to take care of our personal and family lives, but we did not see the life beyond the family as part of our religious life. That may have been due in part to two factors. Our parents and grandparents had enough to do to put bread on the table. They had neither the time nor the energy, nor the education, to tackle the problems of the larger society. An exception was Catholic involvement in the union movements. Second, the larger society was hostile to the Church. Thus we tended to keep ourselves apart from it.

But these two factors no longer hold sway. Some of us have the time and the energy and the education to tackle society's problems. And since Vatican II we have joined the mainstream of society, for better and for worse. The society may still be hostile to the Church in different ways, but we are much more part of it than we were in the past.

Concretely, that means that society's problems are our problems, and we should be moved to compassion when we see them. Imagine what we, the Catholic Church in Woonsocket, could do if we worked together for the good of our city.

If parents shepherded their children, if adults shepherded their elderly parents, if family members shepherded each other, if politicians conceived of their offices as the opportunity to exercise a shepherding role with respect to their constituents, if we as a church took on the problems of society both locally and nationally and internationally, what a world we could bring into existence. It would be a world approaching the Kingdom of God. And that is precisely our job. Having experienced the compassionate love of Jesus for us, we must then pass it on, or, as the phrase goes, pass it forward.