

## Sheep Without a Shepherd

Mark 6:30–34

The gospels constantly remind us how important Jesus's role as a teacher was; teaching is clearly His most important activity, right from the beginning of His public ministry. In the first chapter of Mark Jesus goes into the synagogue to teach, and people comment on the strength and importance of His teaching right away: Jesus's teaching has *authority*, they say. Later He cuts short His healing ministry so He can continue to teach—'that is why I came', He says in 1.38. He even does some teaching about teaching, like the parable of the sower that Mark records for us.

In v 34 of this morning's Gospel reading, we see just how important this work is, and why He puts it before everything else. Look at the verse: When Jesus saw the crowd *He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So He began teaching them many things.*

Now from what I've read, sheep without a shepherd just eat the grass in front of them until there's none left, and then they stand there looking at each other, wondering what to do next. If someone doesn't prod them and move them to where there is more grass, they'll starve to

death. They can't find it for themselves, even if it's only a hundred yards away. They cannot meet their own physical needs. But I'd be willing to bet the crowd Jesus was looking at weren't starving to death waiting for someone to show them more food. What Jesus saw in that crowd that made Him have such compassion was what you still see today when you look at any gathering of people except a gathering of people who've already been well taught by Jesus: people who are depressed because they don't know what the purpose of their lives is, or who are in pain because they are barely on speaking terms with their spouse or their parents or their kids, or because they have lost their job because of the recession, or because they have just been told they or a loved one has cancer; people who are coveting their neighbour's bank account; people who are dysfunctional in some way so they are turning to alcohol or drugs or sex. That's what Jesus saw when he looked at that crowd, and He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, spiritually rather than physically. They needed spiritual help, and didn't know where to turn for it. He knew their need, and His heart ached for them; He felt the same way we do when we are healthy and see a friend sick, or when we have a good marriage and see a friend's marriage in trouble—we wish with all our heart we could do something that would make a difference. Jesus felt the same way, but He could do something that made

a difference, and He did it: *He began to teach them many things.*

Jesus's response to our helplessness is *teaching*, because He knows we need understanding of our situation, and the only way we can get it is to learn from Him. He knows how we were designed, we only know what our disobedient natures tell us. Without his teaching, we are spiritually helpless. With it, our lives begin to recover God's original purpose for them.

And that means our part is to *learn*. Teaching achieves nothing if those who hear it aren't learning, even when the teacher is Jesus. Christianity is not something you absorb by standing near it, it's something you acquire deliberately or not at all, it requires our full cooperation. *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me*, Jesus said. Two active verbs, not just one; not Jesus active and we passive, we have to be as active in learning as He is in teaching. It is a yoke, we put ourselves in harness and get to work, because that's how His teaching changes our lives, when we apply ourselves to His teaching and apply His teaching to ourselves. That's when it becomes teaching with authority, teaching with power.

In some ways, the people Jesus saw were better off than many of us today, because at least they were like sheep *without* a shepherd. Too many people today are like

sheep with a *bad* shepherd: they're led by the nose by people who don't have their best interests at heart, who are exploiting them for their own purposes, whether it's getting them to buy some product, support some candidate, or rally round the latest theological fad. And the characteristic all these bad shepherds seem to share is that they don't teach, they just command: buy this, vote for me, ignore what scripture says about sex. I'll tell you what to believe.

Jesus *teaches*. He gives us understanding. That's His answer to the confusion so many of us experience so often in this complicated world we live in: understanding. Jesus wants understanding co-operation, it's only the bad shepherds who seek blind obedience. Jesus appeals to our minds, as you would expect, since intellect is what makes us the image of God; all life, even at the simplest level, has emotion and feeling; only humans have intellect on the same or similar scale. But because we've disobeyed God, because of human sin, our intellect is disordered, and Jesus teaches in order to restore it to its proper working condition.

Just liking Jesus, even being with Jesus, isn't enough. The crowd loved Jesus, followed him all over the countryside, the crowd was in the presence of Jesus, yet still were like sheep without a shepherd, because they weren't learning what He was teaching.

The practical example that comes immediately to mind today is a sad one for many of us, because if you want an example of sheep without a shepherd, you need look no farther than the leadership of our church in its General Convention all last week. I don't enjoy doing this from the pulpit, but from time to time I have to point out that much of the teaching that is coming out from the highest level of our church is just wrong, directly opposed to Jesus's teaching, and the resolution passed by General Convention last week, saying that the ordination process is available to people in a sexual relationship outside marriage is certainly one of the wrong ones. But what makes them such a perfect example of sheep without a shepherd is not only being wrong about it, but also saying it in such a confusing and even incomprehensible way, and then not even being able to agree afterwards as to what it actually meant. At the last General Convention the Episcopal Church passed a resolution saying dioceses should not elect anyone in such a relationship as a bishop, then at this Convention it passed one saying all orders of ministry, including bishop, are open even to people in such a relationship, and then the Presiding Bishop wrote a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury admitting that 'this action is being variously interpreted by different individuals', that it's 'more descriptive than prescriptive in nature', that 'we are still not all of one mind', that 'Some within our Church may understand

[the] Resolution... to give Standing Committees... and Bishops with jurisdiction more latitude in consenting to episcopal elections. Others... will not.' Some of the bishops who voted for this resolution even signed a statement the next day upholding the traditional teaching of the church! In other words, no one knows whether the new resolution is contradictory to the last one, whether it superseded the last one, or what was the point of what the convention just did. Sheep without a shepherd, with the depressing difference that these sheep are supposed to be shepherds. If Jesus had compassion on the crowd in our gospel, He must be openly weeping at the spectacle of our church. But we know from Scripture what His reaction is: *teach them many things*. We've learned some things, but as the passage says, Jesus taught *many things*. We still have so much to learn. More than ever, we need to open our Bibles, read our Bibles, think about what we read, and then apply it, put it into practice. *Lean not on your own understanding, but in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your path*. Jesus's teaching needs to be brought to bear on the church as well as on the world outside the church.

But it's no good trying to correct their teaching, or rectify our own mistakes, until we get the basic message that His teaching is what changes things for the

better—that's the first thing to learn. Until we're clear on that, we can't really learn anything else.

Jesus teaches. His words are written down for us so we can turn to them any time, we don't have to worry about the teacher being away on sabbatical. He's still present with His students in the power of His Holy Spirit, guiding us into all truth. Summer's a great time to relax and refresh, to be by ourselves in a quiet place and get some rest, maybe even by boat to a solitary place. But not a time to forget His teaching. Let's stick with our teacher, let's skip no classes, until we join Him in the true life of eternity, when our understanding, as well as our joy, will be complete.