

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)  
(Jeremiah 23:1-6 / Mark 6:30-34)  
19.07.2015

## God's mercy

Dear brothers and sisters,

Jesus came into the world to reveal the merciful heart of God for all those he created out of love, each one of his children without exception. In order to fulfil his mission, there was no other way for Jesus to show mercy than to be merciful as his heavenly Father is merciful. It is because Jesus' heart was filled with mercy for humankind that he was and remains an icon of the Father's merciful love for the world, for each one of us. We have a good example of the Lord's mercy in today's gospel passage: "As Jesus stepped ashore, he saw a large crowd; and **he took pity on them**", his heart was filled with compassion and mercy for these people, "because they were like sheep without a shepherd", in other words because they needed protection and guidance.

"Jesus took pity on the crowd". Pity, compassion, mercy! What do these words mean? Compassion comes from a Latin word meaning "both to love someone and to suffer with that person". This Latin word is the translation of a much more visceral Greek word whose nearest equivalent would be something like "gut-feeling". In Hebrew, "compassion" is the feeling a mother has for the child in her womb. When Jesus looked out upon the crowds, he took pity on them, he was moved to the depths of his being for them. And he set himself to teach them at some length. This is a good example of the Lord's mercy for us: The Lord is with us like a mother caring for her children, helping them to grow and arrive at their full stature.

At the beginning of today's gospel passage, we see Jesus filled with mercy for his apostles who are coming back from mission. Jesus calls his apostles to come away to some lonely place all by themselves and rest for a while. We are all concerned by Jesus' call to his apostles because since our baptism we all are apostles, we all are called to bear witness to Christ in words and deeds, wherever we are in our life today.

Jesus calls us to go regularly to some **lonely place**. This lonely or desolate place evokes the desert where John the Baptist called Israel to repentance, the desert where Jesus was tempted, and above all the solitary place to which Jesus used to retreat in order to pray. We have to go regularly to that kind of lonely place to pray in order to hear anew the Lord's call to repentance and conversion, to experience not only intimacy with the Lord but also temptation, because we were created free, free to say 'no' to the Lord, and finally in order to receive from the Lord his will for our lives, his plan over us. We cannot bear witness to Christ without knowing Him first. A regular passage through a desert experience is an opportunity for us to know Christ. We cannot give Christ to others without previously receiving Him in prayer. Generally speaking, we can give only what

we have received. We shall become an icon of the Lord in the world insofar as we shall have contemplated Christ in prayer, for He is the icon of the Father.

The Lord calls us to go regularly to some lonely place to be by ourselves and **rest** for a while. The idea of resting brings to mind the words of psalm 22:

“The Lord is my shepherd;  
there is nothing I shall want.  
Fresh and green are the pastures  
where he gives me repose.  
Near restful waters he leads me  
to revive my drooping spirit”.

We truly rest ourselves by taking time to meet with the Lord and taste his loving and saving presence. This is true and life-restoring rest, the rest we look for, the rest we need, the rest that the Lord alone can give us. We can't but recall the beginning of the Confessions of St Augustine: “Lord, You have formed us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in you”. The Lord's call to go to a lonely place to pray and meet with Him is really a sign of his mercy. We could say that it is a sign of his maternal care which wants to help us to become who we truly are: beloved children of God our Father saved by the Lord's mercy. In Matthew's gospel, the Lord says to us: “Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls”. This is all about the Lord's mercy for his people. Let us welcome it for ourselves,

To take time to go regularly to some lonely place to pray and find rest is not always easy. We can be so caught up in all that we do that to take some distance from our daily activities requires of us a lot of courage and energy. It also happens that we are afraid to go and meet with the Lord, because we feel that it may not be just a loving encounter but also an exacting and challenging one, and that is something we can understandably redoubt. To meet with the Lord is always both comforting and challenging. But it is in the desert that the Lord speaks to our hearts and teaches us the good news of his kingdom. It is in prayer, in the desert, that the Lord makes our hearts merciful just like his own heart.

It is in the lonely place that we discover who we are: a sheep. It is in the lonely place that we discover whom we are in need of: a shepherd. The shepherd of whom we are in need is Jesus, the icon of our merciful Father, because mercy is what we need most. Mercy is what the world is waiting for; it is what we long for. Mercy is what we have to offer to the world on God's behalf. Lord Jesus, have mercy upon your people, have mercy upon us! Give us a merciful heart! Make of us apostles of your mercy in today's world!