

THE RETURN OF THE TWELVE, AND JESUS' FIRST WITHDRAWAL (Mark 6: 30-34)

Jesus had recently heard the news of Herod's execution of John the Baptist. The disciples returned from their preaching tours in pairs in Galilee, full of reports of all that they had done, and the teaching that they had been able to do. Here is a picture of Jesus' concern for His disciples. It seems to have been that, and not concern for Himself, that led to this withdrawal to an uninhabited area. No doubt he was aware that Herod, who had put John the Baptist to death, would also treat Him similarly if he had the chance. He wanted to give His disciples a chance to rest for a little. But so many people kept coming and going that Jesus and His disciples didn't even have the time to eat, let alone recuperate.

They took a boat to go to Bethsaida Julias, where he fed the five thousand. But even in the boat they couldn't get away from the crowds. Perhaps many in the crowd had come to seek Jesus out for themselves after they had heard the preaching of His disciples. We have to imagine them running along the shore of the Lake of Galilee, splashing across where the Jordan entered the Lake, and standing on the north-eastern shore under the Golan Heights already when the boat put in.

We get a picture of Jesus' compassion for them. Mark's word for "filled with pity for them" is related to a Greek word meaning "intestines". We can say, "My heart goes out to you." But we can't refer to the liver or the intestines in that kind of way. We sometimes say, "He feels all screwed up", or "He feels it in the pit of his stomach". That comes close to what Mark means. He felt genuine compassion for those people, because they were "like sheep without a shepherd". Obviously- what they needed wasn't simply healing from physical complaints.

That phrase is an allusion to passages in the Old Testament. Moses asked the Lord to set someone over the congregation of Israel and lead them, "that the congregation of the Lord might not be like sheep that had no shepherd." That was the occasion when the Lord told Moses to install Joshua as his assistant and successor (Nm 27:17). Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, went to visit Ahab the king of Israel, who was considering war with Ramoth Gilead. The prophet Micaiah was called in, and he reported a vision he had: "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains like sheep that have no shepherd." The Lord said, "These have no master. Let each return to his house in peace" (1 Kng 22:17). The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel, complaining of the irresponsible shepherds of Israel, who fed themselves, and not the flocks: "So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered." The Lord promised that He Himself would be the shepherd of His people, gather them, and care for them. Jesus, the Lord, the Messiah, had now come, as had been promised, to be the true Shepherd of His people. He broke off His plans for rest and recuperation, and began to teach the people many things there in the deserted place near the Lake until had set. That met their real need. He is the second Moses. He is the servant of the Lord who would be the shepherd of God's people. The feeding of the five thousand that followed also showed Him as one greater than Moses, at whose time the Lord had fed His people in the wilderness with manna from heaven.

He is our Shepherd, and He still has the same pity and compassion for His flock.