

11th Sunday of Ordinary Time – A

When I was in seminary, I was very blessed to be able to study in the Holy Land for about 10 weeks along with the rest of my class. It was during one of the rare momentary periods of relative peace and calm there.

Among the things we did was visit this place where there was a herd of sheep. I wouldn't really call it a farm – it was not like a farm as we typically think of one – and I think really it was more for tourists. Anyway, we were given the task of trying to move the sheep from one circle to another one perhaps a couple hundred feet away. We were told that they responded to this word, “Yalla” – or something like that – and so all of us started to say that word, over and over, with lots of gesturing, walking back and forth, and so on. Needless to say, our herd of sheep had no idea what to do or what we were doing. They didn't budge from the first circle. They were sheep

without a shepherd – or rather, I should say, there were sheep with forty shepherds, and they did not know which one to listen to.

The Holy Land has, like the rest of the world, changed dramatically since the time of Christ, but the landscape remains the same, and there are still sheep to be found there. And so there were times when we did see herds of sheep dutifully following their shepherd. Jesus would often use examples or metaphors from the world of his time to teach his followers, because these examples made sense to them – it was what they knew and understood. And Matthew the evangelist likewise incorporated these common metaphors in his Gospel. So we have the description he gives in today's Gospel reading of Jesus seeing the crowds and having pity on them, "because they were like sheep without a shepherd." The people who first heard Matthew's Gospel would automatically have understood what Matthew was trying to convey here.

The people of Israel indeed did not have a true shepherd when Jesus came into the world. Their kings – Herod and such – were not Jewish, but rather imposed on the Jews by the Romans. Their priests were political appointees and not examples of holiness and true faithfulness to the Lord. So the Jews of Jesus’ time did not have real, legitimate leaders, either political or spiritual. And so no doubt there was a fair amount of social chaos.

Two thousand years later, although the world has changed in immeasurable ways, I think human nature remains roughly the same, and we often are still like sheep without a shepherd. Or perhaps we are like the sheep from the place in the Holy Land I visited with my seminarian classmates – there were so many of us trying to act like shepherds, the sheep had no idea which one to listen to or follow. Our world still has false shepherds, and all kinds of people who claim to lead (or might want to lead or influence people – all the so-called internet “influencers” for example), and

people are often confused as to whom to listen or pay attention to. There is tremendous social confusion. As a society, we can no longer agree on what makes for a good society; we cannot agree on what is good or evil, on what we should pursue and what we should avoid, and so on.

The world has always been in need of a shepherd, whether we realize it or not. And that is one of the reasons why Jesus came, to be our shepherd. Which implies also that there is a place to which he needs to lead us. He of course is not leading us from one place here in this world to another, but rather from this life to eternal life. And of course for Jesus to lead us also means we have to listen to him; we have to pay attention to what he is trying to say to us and in the way he is trying to speak to us. He speaks to us in multiple ways, including through Scripture and through prayer. But sometimes we can misinterpret Scripture or misunderstand what he might be

trying to say to us in prayer. And so he has also given us the teaching authority of the Church to serve as our guide in this life.

And because Jesus knew that he would be ascending one day into heaven to reign there forever, in his wisdom he also appointed his 12 apostles to serve as his successors. And they in turn appointed others, so that there would be shepherds to continue to lead the Lord's flock until he comes again at the end of time. Our bishops are the successors to the apostles, and the priests are essentially the bishops' helpers.

Jesus recognized that all these sheep need lots of shepherds – or, to use another metaphor, he knew that “the harvest was abundant but the laborers are few” – and so that is why he urged his disciples to pray that the Lord would send out “laborers for his harvest.” That's why we should always pray for vocations; that's why our bishop asked all the parishes of our diocese to pray this prayer for vocations at every Mass, because the world is in such need of the

good news of salvation. The world needs to hear that we have a Savior, that we have a purpose, that we have another home, a true destination that is not found in this world, and we need to hear how to get there – who we need to follow, the One who will lead us there.

And we should also pray for our priests and our bishops, that we will be holy, that we will be examples of holiness, and that we will not lead people astray through our own shortcomings. Unlike Jesus, priests and bishops are not perfect; we are all sinners, but we like everyone else should be striving for holiness, striving to grow in virtue, striving to live out the promises that we made at our ordinations. I think by now we are all well aware of the damage that unfaithful priests and bishops can do. And I too have to be aware of my own shortcomings – and sometimes I am reminded of them – and I have to remember to practice what I preach too.

So let us always ask the Lord to continue to send good, faithful, holy shepherds into the fields of this world, so that more and more people will be led to the eternal pastures of heaven.

- **June 14, 2026 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**