

Sunday Homily

16TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

18 JULY 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK IV

“He took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

Illustration

The catacombs in Rome are an amazing sight to see. They are burial places unlike the ones we're generally used to. Lying just outside the old Roman city walls, they consist of vast labyrinths of underground passageways, lined on either side by many tiers of burial places, like enormous dormitories of multilayered bunk beds. There are many miles of them. The early Christians in Rome buried their dead like this because they were not a wealthy community and they could not afford to buy all the land they would have needed to bury their dead in open-air cemeteries. It also gave them a place to worship when the Roman authorities were persecuting Christians, and it allowed these early Christian communities to bury their dead together, following Christian beliefs about death and the afterlife.

One tomb in the catacombs belongs to an eight-month-old baby boy, called Aurelius Castus. His mother, Antonia, had the tomb made for him when he died in the third century and she had both their names carved on the marble slab covering the opening of the tomb. But she didn't just have their names carved, she also had an image carved onto the marble slab. This image was of a man carrying a sheep across his shoulders with two more sheep at his feet. It is the image of the good shepherd.

Gospel Teaching

This image was not meant to be a portrait of Christ: it was meant as a symbol, like the Christian images we are more familiar with today, images of fish, or a dove, or the cross. It was a particularly apt symbol for burials as it called to mind the words of today's psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd", with its comforting message that we shall live in the Lord's house for ever. Images of shepherds crop up in many places in the Bible. In today's readings we have examples from both the Old and New Testaments with the prophet Jeremiah, the psalmist and Mark the evangelist all using the image of the shepherd to great effect.

In today's Gospel we hear about Jesus and his apostles, worn out from their ministry, seeking a bit of peace and quiet to recuperate. But, like the mother of a newborn baby, exhausted from sleepless nights but still able to comfort her child, Jesus still finds a bit more to give to the people who come to him. Mark describes the people as being "like sheep without a shepherd" and it seems