

All of our readings today show us Jesus as the one, true, good shepherd. He is the wise and just heir to King David. He is the one who gathers those who have gone astray as we heard in Paul's letter. He is the one who walks beside us through the dark valley. Finally, the people in the gospel chase after Jesus because in their hearts they recognize him as the shepherd they so desperately need.

When Jesus established the Church he ensured that it would continue as long as necessary by providing human shepherds to lead it throughout history under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He changed Simon's name to Peter (Cephas) which means rock and told him that he (Peter) would be the rock on which the church would be built. Pope Francis is the 265th successor of Saint Peter. When we think of the hierarchy of the church we often imagine it as a pyramid with the Pope on top. We can also turn the pyramid upside down and have the pope on the bottom, supporting the rest of the church. The rock is supposed to provide the foundation and this imagery coincides with the teaching of Pope Gregory the First in the 6th century who referred to himself as the servant of the servants of God. The papacy is not about worldly power but about service to the entire people of God. Supporting the entire church from the bottom is a nearly impossible job—it would be impossible if not for Jesus' help and our prayers. We pray for the Pope and our local bishop—by name—in every single Mass regardless of whether it is a traditional Latin Mass or a novus ordo Mass in English, Spanish, or Klingon.

We have a duty to pray for our shepherds—be they religious or political—in our personal prayers as well. It does not matter whether or not you like them or agree with them. If we think they are bad or poor shepherds, we should pray for them all the more. They have extremely difficult jobs with great burdens of responsibility which are beyond the comprehension of most of us. Instead of mocking or ridiculing our leaders, or rejoicing in their stumbles or their injuries as many people have been doing recently, we should be praying and fasting for them that God will give them the strength, courage, and compassion they need to do the jobs he is asking them to do. We don't have to agree with them; we don't have to vote for them; we don't have to like them—but we MUST pray for them, regardless of who they are. Jesus himself said love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. If we are not willing to show compassion towards people with whom we disagree, we cannot call ourselves Christians. The church is not democrat or republican or any other political party but she is made up of

people from all of those parties—each one of whom is a member of the body of Christ, bound together most concretely by the Eucharist.

To help remind us of the need to pray for healing in our nation, there are prayer cards in the breezeway. Everyone should take one of these cards home and pray with it every day. More are on the way. By the way, praying for healing in our nation doesn't mean praying that those "on the other side" will change. It means praying for true love and compassion towards all of our fellow citizens regardless of our feelings towards each other. If we truly care for our nation and our fellow citizens we must pray for them and we should also fast and offer sacrifices in reparation for our personal sins and for the sins of our nation.

Now for the gospel. This is the last we are going to hear from Mark for a while. Today's gospel sets the stage for the multiplication of loaves and fishes, but we are going to hear about it from John's point of view. John's account leads us into the Bread of Life discourse which is the theological background for the Eucharist.

That is for later. There are a number of spiritual lessons we can take from what Mark has to tell us today. Jesus wanted to give the disciples some time alone with him after they returned from being sent out in pairs. They needed time to process everything they had experienced. What happened instead? The crowd followed them to the deserted place and Jesus changed his plans. It isn't that he abandoned the twelve in favor of the crowd. He expanded his message to include the multitudes and through the events that followed, taught everyone, including the twelve important lessons about, charity, mercy, and about himself.

Jesus wants to call us out of the distractions of our busy lives and spend time alone with him in prayer. He wants to give us time to rest with him. What often happens though? Our distractions follow us into prayer. How should we respond to those distractions? We can ignore them and try to refocus—a Bible or prayer book can help with that. We can offer them to Jesus and ask him to help us deal with or understand them according to **his** will. Surprisingly, His will **might** be that we stop what we are doing and deal with the "distraction." WARNING!!!: distractions can be the work of the devil trying to lure us away from Jesus. If we keep thinking about entertainment or food or sex or other things we want to do instead of praying, the worst thing we can do is stop praying. However, if someone interrupts our prayer, that person could be Jesus in disguise. It is okay to go help and then come back to Jesus and ask him to help us understand what just happened.

The overarching theme through all of this—if you remember only one thing from today—remember that Jesus comes to us in disguise. It could be a loved one who needs us or wants to spend time with us. It could be a so-called enemy or someone with whom we disagree. It can be someone in front of us or someone we see on tv or on the news. Whoever it is, that person may be Jesus in disguise. Whatever we do to that person, we are doing to Jesus himself.