

16th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

St. Mark 6:30-34

The psalm for this Sunday's Mass, psalm 22, is one of the most well known, if not the most well known, of the 150 psalms of the Bible.

The image of Our Lord as the "Good Shepherd" is one of the oldest images used to describe Him. In fact, one of the oldest paintings—or fresco—of Christ shows Him as a shepherd. For those who have a copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, you will see that ancient drawing on the cover. That fresco was painted on the ceiling of a burial chamber in the catacombs in Rome. Most likely it was painted in that ancient cemetery because the image of the "Good Shepherd" is so closely seen as a sign of hope in life after death. But the appeal of the shepherd was far wider than Christianity and even arose before it. In the classical world, the shepherd with his sheep symbolised the peace of the afterlife and was commonly used in Roman burials. At other times carvings of a shepherd with a sheep on his shoulders were made as offerings to the ancient Greek god Hermes, who it was hoped would carry the dead to the afterlife.

Whilst this psalm was written about a thousand years before the birth of Our Lord, its meaning finds its fulfillment in Christ who we recognise as the "Good Shepherd". For when Our Lord is our shepherd, "[we] shall not want" (*Ps. 22:1*). And even though we "walk in the valley of darkness" there is nothing to fear (*Ps. 22:4*) for we know that "[i]n the Lord's own house shall [we] dwell for ever and ever" (*Ps. 22:6*).

In a world where we are taught that faith is for fools, that Christianity is for the weak-minded, that we should be autonomous, independent, reliant on no one, that success is the only thing that matters and everything we strive for, the fact is that we do need God. If you can find a way to heaven without Him, you will be the first person ever. So for those with faith, we realise that we are not

going to make it through without Our Lord and that He is the only one who can lead us through because He is the only one that knows the way. As one writer said, “Christ is the way out. The way home. The only way that matters.”¹ So it’s a good idea to get to know Him.

So we must learn how we come to know Him. C.S. Lewis, the famous English author and most popularly known for “The Chronicles of Narnia”, said that “[God] shows much more of Himself to some people than to others—not because He has favourites, but because it is impossible for Him to show Himself to a man whose whole mind and character are in the wrong condition. Just as sunlight, though it has no favourites, cannot be reflected in a dusty mirror as clearly as a clean one... [So] if a man’s self is not kept clean and bright, his glimpse of God will be blurred.”²

So what do we do? How can we make ourselves better able to see and to know Our Lord? The first thing we have to accept is that it takes work. Any relationship that matters takes work. And that means we have to realise that it means putting in the effort, facing the good times along with the bad, that it isn’t always going to be easy. As C.S. Lewis also said, “If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity.”

So where to start? Start with the Bible. It used to be that when you wanted to learn about something, you would read a book. Well that is still the case if you want to know God. Also read the great spiritual writers of our faith like St. Augustine or St. Teresa of Avila or Mother Theresa. Or if reading isn’t really what you are into, then listen to the Bible. For example, Fr. Mike Schmitz’s “Bible in a Year” podcast.

Another thing to do is make sure you attend Mass each and every Sunday. Apart from being one of the Ten Commandments and a moral obligation for all

¹ Buechner, F. *A Room Called Remember* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1992), p 123.

² Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, a division of Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 144.

the faithful, it is the closest you will ever come to Our Lord in this life, because in the Blessed Sacrament He is truly there—Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. And if you find Mass boring then it probably means you're not really praying. So before you go to Mass pray to your Guardian Angel to help you to pray so that through the Mass you will find Our Lord.

And along with Mass, go to Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Spend some time with Our Lord who is there on the altar. When St. John Vianney asked an old farmer what he did in the church looking at the tabernacle, the farmer replied, "Nothing. I look at Him, and He looks at me."

And love your mother and your father. Our Lord loved His mother and listened to her and he loved His earthly father and did as he was told. So imitate Our Lord and love your parents.

And pray. However hard it may be, however much you may say you don't know how to pray, just pray. If you have words, use them. If you have nothing to say, then sit in silence. If you have to, complain to Him and you will know His comfort. Otherwise, thank Him for sacrificing Himself for you, and you will find that your life is filled with so much grace. But sometimes it's not such a bad idea to simply sit there and say nothing because it may finally give Our Lord a chance to say something to you.

And remember that is is not the work of an hour or a day or a month or even a year. It is the work of a lifetime. And there will be days when you will feel like you are starting again. But that is because we don't measure our life in Christ by how good we feel. Instead, we measure it by how hard we are willing to work for Him. Again, as C.S. Lewis said, "Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither."

There is a story of a Priest who was celebrating his fiftieth anniversary of ordination. To this he invited his friend, the famous actor Richard Burton, to come and recite his favourite psalm, psalm 22. Richard Burton agreed to do this on the condition that the Priest would also recite it after him. So when the time

came, Richard Burton stood and recited the psalm with such brilliance that the audience thunderously applauded him and gave him a standing ovation. Then it was the turn of the Priest to recite the same psalm. As he finished no one applauded him, there was no standing ovation, there was just silence mingled with tears. When Richard Burton was asked, "Why did people loudly applaud you but were silent for the Priest?", he simply said, "Because I know the psalm, but he knows the Shepherd."