

Homily Mark 6:30-34, 16th Ordinary, "The Good Shepherd, St. Teresa's July 23, 2006 Deacon Jay Dallas
"If You Want To Make God Laugh, Tell Him Your Plans."

The Sunday readings generally have a major theme that is found in both the first reading (sometimes the second) and the gospel. On most weekends, it is best to focus on that major theme. However, there are always other messages to be found in the sacred texts worthy of discussion and it is perfectly OK to investigate those if it seems good to the homilist.

Today's "major theme" is clearly the message of Jesus as the "good shepherd" - the long-awaited leader who will lead God's people faithfully in the way we should go. In turn, we should trust Him as completely as the sheep in the flock trust and follow their shepherd.

However there is another theme folded into the gospel story that is relevant and helpful. It spoke to me powerfully this week and, I hope, it is a message of wisdom that some of you can use, as well.

It is not spoken of directly. Rather, it emerges from the circumstances of the scene we just read about in Mark.

Jesus and the disciples had just completed a rigorous schedule of traveling and preaching. If you remember from last week, the apostles had just completed their first missions on their own, sent out by twos to preach and demonstrate the power of God in the towns of Galilee. The group was tired. They needed rest and time to reflect but the place they were in kept them so busy that the text said that they did not even have an opportunity to eat. So, Jesus told them they would take a few days off and go to a deserted place to rest a while.

And yet, when they arrived by boat in the place they thought would be deserted and peaceful, they found, instead, another large crowd with needs for ministry and healing and instruction.

What I thought was so interesting was how Jesus responded to this disruption in His plans for a retreat - plans that were very useful and reasonable and good. Instead of sending the crowds away, telling them to come back in a few days, or just leaving to try another spot, Jesus “changed His plans”.

In other words, Jesus did not try and get off this detour or remove this interference in His personal plans. He did not treat the change as an annoyance. The passage said He looked on the people with pity and love - and stayed to teach them in the ways of God.

Rather, He discerned that this was the will of God and accepted it as His own plan for the day. He saw that God's plans necessitated a change in His own, so he did that -and was content with it.

We can only imagine what unknown good came out of that generosity. What persons were converted that day who, perhaps, became part of the small bedrock community of believers that would be the beginnings of our Church and the Faith that would change the world? How many children were born into a Christian family because their parents or grandparents were not sent away that day? How many homes later became a friendly refuge for persecuted Christians or missionaries because they themselves had been given the gift of Christ's love that day? Who knows? Only God. And it is all because Jesus was willing to change His plans.

This was not the first time Jesus did such a thing. Remember, for example, the first miracle he worked at the wedding in Cana. There he told His mother that it was "not time" yet for Him to work a miracle. Yet, out of love for the wedding couple and for His mother, He changed His plans.

That's amazing, I think, to see instances where Jesus, who is God, and who's will is sovereign, would change His mind about things - choosing a path that was not in His original plan and making it, instead, the proper way to proceed.

These examples speak to us about the inevitability of changed plans and failed expectations and how to handle them.

We modern people, myself very much included, are taught to be goal-driven and schedule-oriented. While it is true that getting things done usually includes planning ahead and making efficient use of our limited time - I think we sometimes believe that our success actually depends on such rigor. But, our own stories reinforce the one we read today in Jesus's life and remind us that our success actually and ultimately depends much more on following the wisdom of God.

Who among us not experienced at blessing in complete surprise - a good friend made in an unexpected place - an opportunity given when the original plan fell apart - or meeting a future in an unlikely place - in my own case, I met my wife in a town and a school that I never wanted or planned to be - and yet, there she was. Thank God.

It is good to have goals and plans. Life is too short and too important to just fritter away like its just one long Spring Break. But, Jesus' own example teaches us that we should not hold on to those plans so tightly that we can only let go through broken fingers. Focusing so much on OUR plans and OUR desires can leave us blind and insensitive to what God actually wants us to do. That is self-defeating, not empowering. God's ways, even the unexpected surprises, are better.

God has a plan for us and he knows what way will bring us the most goodness.

I don't say that every situation we find ourselves in is God's will. Disease, war, heartbreak, addictions and abuse are NOT God's will. The free will He has given us has been misused. As a result, Evil exists in the world and hurts us all. We all have hurt ourselves and others with our sins and all been the victim of the sins of others, as well. We can often find ourselves in places and situations and conditions of suffering that God would does not want for us.

But, even in those broken, dark and fallen days, God is not absent. He says that He has counted every hair on our head. Wherever we, He goes. Even though we try and hide from Him, He will not hide from us. We belong to Him. We are His children. He loves us and nothing will ever change that. And, His grace is able to bring goodness even out of the worst situation, if we will let Him. No evil can overcome His grace unless we allow it to. That is His promise to us. (Rom 8:28).

Therefore, plan wisely, but seek God's will even more - be directed by God even more than our by your Blackberry or Palm Pilot or daily planner - and don't be too quick to grind our teeth over the detours or to curse the interruptions that come our way.

Instead, look for grace at every turn and be willing to change. Ask for the grace to be content in every situation. Look for reasons to be grateful every day rather than bitter - look at the divine light rather into the shadows. We have that choice. If we do, we can have the great gift of walking through life with a stable sense of belonging rather than of always feeling out of place - of learning to be content in the moment even as we wait for the healing and the help we need for present difficulties.

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Our Faith reveals to us that our few years on this earth are, in truth, actually part of a much larger event that stretches out far beyond the boundaries of our birth and death. The connections and causes and effects of our lives go way beyond our view. We are vitally connected to an eternal and universal plan..That's an exhilarating truth - but one that only God's mind can fully contain.

No matter what season you are in right now -of happiness or suffering - God is with you. And, whether tomorrow comes off exactly as you expect it to or brings big surprises, God will be there, too. The love of the God and His wonderful promises are forever and for all seasons.

We cannot know where we will be in 10 years, 1 year - or even 1 day - but He does.

And we can have great hope and consolation knowing that whatever the place is like when we dock our boat and step out - whether we feel like our life is right on schedule or way off track at any given time - God, our Good Shepherd, is here with us.

Therefore, let us trust Him more and fret less.

The Truth is, **DESPITE ALL THE PAIN AND UNPREDICTABILITY AND INEVITABLE CHANGES IN THIS LIFE** - as long as you stay beside the Good Shepherd, you are, in this moment and at any moment, **OK** - right where God wants you to be.