

16th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

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 multi-layered bunk beds. There are many kilometres of them. The early Christians of 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.

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 Jesus cannot let them stay in this state. Jesus is the good shepherd for everyone. We only get half the story in today's reading, as the following verses in the Bible tell how these same people are fed in the famous miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus

does not just look after their spiritual needs, he provides for their physical needs too. He really is a good shepherd.

The image of the good shepherd can show us a few things about Jesus. Jesus as shepherd echoes the image of King David in the Old Testament, working as a shepherd before he became king. Jesus comes from the line of David as was prophesied in today's first reading. The genealogy of Jesus is detailed at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel to prove his relationship with King David. But Jesus truly is a shepherd king, ready to care for his flock rather than to take on the grandeur of power.

Picturing Jesus as our shepherd also emphasises God's kindness to us. Jesus takes on the role of caring for all our needs and guiding us through life if we will follow him. As he takes on this lowly role of shepherd, we can see that God isn't distant or unapproachable. In Jesus, God is physically present and is ready to meet all our needs.

The image of the good shepherd also highlights our weakness and folly. Compared with God's greatness we are as helpless as sheep. We may rather not think of this, preferring to be proud of our achievements and status, but it is good for us to be reminded that we are all dependant upon God's grace. Fortunately for us, through God's grace we are given the great gift of Jesus to be our shepherd, and we can be confident that if we follow him we are in the very best of care.