

6. December 2022

## The Shepherd gathers the sheep

Is 40:1-11

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."*

With the coming of the Messiah, the concept of the "people of God" is extended to include all those who have accepted the message of salvation and thus entered into a living relationship with God. The Church, which is home to so many people, is the place where the redeemed gather and praise the Lord.

God has fulfilled his promise, gathering as the Good Shepherd does, also those who belonged to another fold: *"And there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and I must lead these too. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock, one shepherd."* (Jn 10:16)

Thus Jesus sent His messengers into the whole world, to bring to people the proclamation of salvation. Just as in today's text Jerusalem is assured of consolation, and told that the times of her servitude having come to an end, so the nations can be told that the time of slavery has come to an end. They no longer have to serve idols or remain in darkness, confused by false doctrines; they are no longer slaves of sin, but the Lord has paid the ransom to set them free and they have been called to the Kingdom of the beloved Son of God (cf. Col 1:13)!

*"Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem..."*

Announce to all peoples that, in Jerusalem, on the Cross, the Messiah has paid the debt, thus becoming the path that leads us through the desert. Everyone can walk on this safe path and thus reach home, if only they accept the offer of grace: they no longer have to walk alone through the deserts and steppes of life, but the Lord will always be with them and will never forsake them!

In the comforting image of the good shepherd, the Lord describes His service, knowing well how He is to guide each one in particular. The little ones need His tender closeness; the sheep He raises need His gentle guidance; others need a strong hand. What this day's Gospel proclaims to us always stands:

*"Tell me. Suppose a man has a hundred sheep and one of them strays; will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go in search of the stray?" (Mt 18:12).*

The Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep and does not flee when He sees the wolf coming (Jn 10:11-12). He is not a hired hand who would take advantage of the sheep for His own benefit. For Him, the peoples of the earth are not a means to increase His greatness, as will be the case with the Antichrist, who will not really be interested in the good of the people. Although he presents himself in the guise of a sheep and pretends to be a good shepherd, inside he is corrupt. He is not interested in the sheep, he does not lead them to the good pastures, he is not filled with the Spirit of the Lord... The Antichrist does not love God and, therefore, he does not really love people either, although outwardly he may appear to do so. Instead of good pastures, he will offer them worn-out pastures; instead of teaching them that only God can fill the soul, he will present them with a religion without transcendence, which remains in the affairs

of this world. It will relativize sin and will not exhort humankind to true conversion. Thus, he will offer them false consolations; that which pleases and flatters people...

The Good Shepherd, on the other hand, will neither flatter them nor relativize sin. He will announce true mercy, which always goes hand in hand with the "truth that saves". He will not deprive the sheep of the fullness of the Gospel and will announce only that joy which comes from living according to the Will of God. He, through His messengers, will not rest until all men and women have received the message of salvation and the message of the Good Shepherd.

In view of the Second Coming of Christ, all those who have recognized the Lord and serve him are called to become shepherds of those who are still astray, of those who do not know the good pastures of God or who have to be content with dry pastures. The disciples of the Lord are to take on the odor of the Good Shepherd, the "good odor of Christ" (cf. 2 Cor 2:15). The life of their Lord must be reflected in them, and the way of being of the Heavenly Good Shepherd must be palpable. Then they will be able to care for all those whom God has entrusted to them. Love and truth will become an infallible compass, and thus we will be able to become messengers of joy and raise our voice with the authority of God.

People are in need of Christ's saving message! The Lord alone can truly satisfy our hunger and thirst! The repayment of our debt to the Lord for all His love should consist in our perseverance until we have done our part, so that He can lead His own to the meadows of eternal life.