

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

We often complain about people in authority. Whether they are parents, governors, teachers, managers, mayors, members of congress, the president, the pope, the bishop, or the pastor, everybody with responsibility hears complaints. Many times the complaints are not fair. Sometimes when people are yelling about something, it's because their complaint doesn't make much sense; if they talked about the situation more reasonably, they'd often see it isn't so bad. But other times complaints are legitimate. Some people in authority abuse their position. They think more about their own comforts than those of the people for whom they should care. A well-ordered society has levels of authority. That is what makes it work. Leaders are supposed to possess better skills than followers have. We expect our leaders to be good at what they do. And we don't like it when they're not.

Through the prophet Jeremiah God speaks a blistering attack on the kings of his day. They are called "shepherds" in today's first reading, but God is referring to some specific individuals. King Jehoahaz ruled for three months and then was deposed by the king of Egypt. King Jehoiakim built swanky buildings for himself at the expense of his people. Jehoiachin became king at the age of 18, ruled for three months, and died in exile. They were all awful leaders. Getting rid of them was only half the solution, though. God then needed to provide good rulers for the needs of his people. Through Jeremiah God expressed his loving care for the people. He promised that he would restore order for them. The people were not completely innocent. They had committed their sins too. God says, "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock from all the lands to which I have driven them." God drove them into various places of exile because of their own faults. But God loved them enough to bring them back.

God promised a future ruler who would restore the kind of leadership people experienced during the time of David. God promised to raise up "a righteous shoot" - like a new branch on the Jesse tree. Christians see in this statement a prophecy for the coming of Jesus Christ, who rules over us as a truly righteous king.

Whenever we have complaints about our leaders, we should first be ready to criticize ourselves. Have we done anything that has contributed to the situation we're complaining about? Are we blaming someone else just because we don't want to take responsibility for some of the mistakes that we've made? Then we should also take heart from the belief that Jesus Christ is the ruler over all. We may for a time have to endure leaders who are inadequate, but ultimately they are not in charge. Jesus Christ governs our lives and our hearts. Our faith and hope in him will give us patience to deal with inadequate leaders and to keep our hearts at peace.

Christ also gives us an example of leadership that we should follow. Even though we have people with authority over us, we each have some authority over others. They may be complaining about us. We need to be good shepherds too. We will be when we imitate the sacrifice and faithfulness of Christ.