

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Ex 19:2-6_a; Ps 100; Rom 5:6-11; Mt 9:36-10:8

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The topic of this week has to do with “being God’s people.” In the first reading, the Israelites have arrived in Sinai, the seventh of twelve steps after leaving Egypt. God’s first words have to do with how special Israel is: God’s —the king’s— “personal property” (Hebrew *segul·lah*; cf. Ti 2:14). God has chosen Israel out of all peoples on the earth, and lovingly carried him like an eagle its young (cf. Dt 32:11). God’s loving act of salvation from slavery is the basis of the covenant made in Sinai (Ex 24:1-11). The psalm sings of the Lord shepherding his people like a flock.

In the gospel, Jesus has pity on the people who are like sheep without a shepherd. The leaders of Israel —like so many “leaders” today— had abdicated their duties. Ez 34 denounces this, with the promise that Yahweh would himself shepherd his flock through his servant David as the “good shepherd,” the sole shepherd. Matthew’s gospel recounts how Jesus reconstituted Israel: the twelve disciples represent the twelve tribes, the totality of the people. Their mission is primarily one of healing and of seeking out the lost (or “stray,” even “outcast”) sheep of the house of Israel (cf. Ez 34:16; Mt 9:12). According to our gospel, the disciples are not even to go outside of Israelite territory.

Jesus the Good Shepherd gave his life for his sheep, Jn 10:11. This was God’s final act of righteousness, as scholar James A. Sanders once wrote. It was an act which justified —made righteous— the wicked, as the second reading states (see also Rom 3:21-26). This is the basis for the new covenant, not inaugurated without blood, as was the first covenant in Sinai (see Hb 9:11-22). And so, as Sanders says, in Christ God “came *all the way* this time.” Realizing this changed Paul’s life. He had sought his own righteousness in Torah-observance, and had not understood, but bitterly opposed, Christ and his followers. When he realized that Christ had become a curse for us, Gal 3:13, he wanted more than anything to be with Christ, *in Christ*, to the point of being crucified with him (Gal 2:19) and sharing in his passion (Phil 3:7-11). This union with God in Christ gives a very new meaning to “being God’s special possession.”