

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (7/18-19/2009)

Jeremiah 23/1-6, Psalm 23, Ephesians 2/13-18, Mark 6/30-34

In my recent bout with by-pass surgery, I found out a few things about myself and a few things about the aftermath of such surgery.

One of those discoveries was that depression is a frequent companion for people with heart problems. And, if not attended to, that depression can trigger further heart difficulties.

That was confirmed for me a short time ago when I was given a copy of the "Harvard Medical Health Letter"; it spoke very compellingly about the incidence of depression among heart patients and some possible treatments.

I was no exception to that medical symptom.

One of the things I did to counteract the bouts (and they were only episodic, not chronic) was to pray Psalm 23, the responsorial psalm for today's Mass.

I prayed it so often that I memorized the psalm.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

I hoped in my prayer that the Lord would take care of me.

"Even though I walk in the dark valley, I fear no evil for you are at my side with your rod and your staff that give me courage."

There were dark valleys as I believe anyone who has had heart or by-pass surgery will tell you.

Knowing that the Lord walked with me through the darkness, the panicky moments, gave me more courage and eased the burden of the depression.

The final words of the psalm capped it all: *"Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come."*

Fortunately, those dark days are behind me now - I hope!

In today's first reading, Jeremiah scolds the religious authorities who were pretending to shepherd Israel.

Actually, it is not Jeremiah who speaks, but the Lord God.

"Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock...You have scattered my flock and driven them away...You have not cared for them!"

Woe to them indeed, especially since they have been entrusted with the care and the consolation of the flock, the people of Israel.

The image of shepherds we may have garnered from *Jeremiah* is rescued by Jesus in the incident reported in *Mark's* gospel.

When Jesus saw the vast crowd upon disembarking from the boat, *"his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd..."*

We may resent being called sheep, for such beasts are seen as a mindless group of animals, fearful, timid, even stupid.

But we cannot resent Jesus who is the good shepherd.

The one who walks with us through the dark valleys of our lives.

The one who leads us to green pastures and restful waters, and along the right path.

The one with whom we shall dwell for years to come.