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Inspired by the compassion of Jesus

There are many passages in Scripture which shed light on and provide inspiration for our Salesian way of life and mission. One of my favourites is that incident recounted by St Mark after the disciples have returned from an extended missionary experience. Jesus notices that they are tired and in need of a break, and so proposes a boat trip to a quiet spot. The people guess what is happening and arrive at the destination ahead of them.

As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. (Mark 6:34)

Jesus is aware of the confusion and need of the crowd, and he is moved to the depths of his being by the sight of them. It is a description of him which recurs twelve times in the Gospels, a description which captures one of his most striking characteristics. Compassion is more than a feeling of pity or sympathy; it is a feeling which moves a person to action. Here it prompts Jesus to provide the people firstly with the nourishment of his teaching, and then with a lakeside meal of bread and fishes. Elsewhere his compassion is said to move him to cleanse a leper, to heal the sick and the blind, to bring a young man back to life, and to associate others with him in his ministry.

It is interesting that the crowd's situation is described in terms of their being like shepherd-less sheep, a phrase with echoes of the Old Testament. Through the prophets God promised his troubled people that one day He would provide them with a true shepherd, who would care for them with gentleness and love. For the Evangelists, Jesus is that shepherd. The Fourth Gospel exploits this image with profound insight and sensitivity. Jesus comes that we, the sheep, may have life in all its fullness. As the genuine shepherd he knows his sheep by name, and loves them so much that he lays down his life for them.

A shepherd's heart

Many centuries later a young priest called Don Bosco encountered lots of young people on the streets of Turin who were in great need. They were without a home, without work, without educational possibilities, without religious instruction, without prospects, like sheep without a shepherd.



His shepherd's heart was moved to compassion, and he reached out to them, offering them acceptance, safety and friendship. He offered them a home base, a place of welcome, security and fun. He provided education and professional training, and found jobs for them. He enabled them to experience the compassionate love of God embracing and transforming their lives. And he involved others (including some of them) in his expanding mission, others with compassionate and shepherding hearts, who over the years and across the world feel drawn to respond to the needs of the young in his way, which is the way of Jesus.

This has become the Salesian movement.