

# GREGORY THE GREAT

## THE LESSON: THE HEART OF A SHEPHERD

*“The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning.”  
(Lamentations 5:15)*

The expansive Roman empire with its peace and order had descended into a chaos of invasions, floods, famine and pestilence by the time Gregory came on the scene in the sixth century. A struggle for authority within the Church had created tensions between the bishops of Constantinople in the East and Rome in the West. Though Gregory’s family was wealthy and prominent, the city of Rome where Gregory grew up would not have been the glorious and opulent city of former days, but rather a place where ruin and poverty were to be seen all around.

*“When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them,  
because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”  
(Matthew 9:36)*

When Gregory’s father died he came into a large inheritance which he used to found seven monasteries (six in Sicily and one in Rome), and to give generously to the poor. He himself entered the monastery in Rome, where he later became an abbot. He also spent time in the service of Pope Pelagius, acting as an ambassador in the East. (In the western Church the bishop of Rome, or “pope”, had come to be regarded as the supreme head of the Christian Church). Upon the death of Pelagius, Gregory was elected to be the next Pope, an election he tried and failed to have annulled. The political chaos of the time meant that popes were in the position, not just of providing theological and pastoral guidance, but also of trying to negotiate peace with invading armies and find practical solutions to the poverty and civil crises of the people. Gregory was deeply concerned about the people under his care, especially the poor and sick. He got right to work doing his best to fill the gaps: arranging for food distribution and repair of the city as well as successfully negotiating peace with would-be invaders.

*“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant.”  
(Matthew 20:26)*

When the Archbishop of Constantinople in the East took on the title “Universal Bishop”, Gregory instead chose to call himself “the Servant of the Servants of God”. He believed that we are all called to use our gifts in the service of the “chief Shepherd”, as he wrote:

“For there are some who are eminently endowed with virtues, and for the training of others are exalted by great gifts, who are pure in zeal for chastity, strong in the might of abstinence, filled with the feasts of doctrine, humble in the long-suffering of patience, erect in the fortitude of authority, tender in the grace of loving-kindness, strict in the severity of justice. Truly such as these, if when called they refuse to undertake offices of supreme rule, for the most part deprive themselves of the very gifts which they received not for themselves alone, but for others also... If, then, the care of feeding is the proof of loving, whosoever abounds in virtues, and yet refuses to feed the flock of God, is convicted of not loving the chief Shepherd” (Gregory, *Pastoral*).

*“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us  
and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”  
(Ephesians 5:1-2)*

Though much of Gregory’s attention was taken up with practical concerns, he did not neglect his spiritual responsibilities. Gregory preached and wrote extensively. He began a choir for boys and gave attention to the formation

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of the liturgy. Perhaps most famously, Gregory is remembered for arranging for the freeing of English slaves he encountered in the markets of Rome, and then sending missionary monks to that part of the world so that England might hear the Gospel. Gregory died at the age of 65 following two years of severe illness. He had been Pope for 13 years, but had spent a lifetime seeking to model his own heart after that of the Good Shepherd.

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## AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON'T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE "FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES", WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON'T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER.](http://prayerbook.ca/resources/bcponline/family-prayer))

Review today's lesson. Choose a line of scripture or a phrase from the story of Gregory that you find edifying, inspiring or instructive:

Throughout this week, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the phrase you've chosen. Decide on one concrete action you can take this week based on your reflections.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following collect.

*O God, our heavenly Father, who didst raise up thy faithful servant Gregory to be a Bishop in thy Church and to feed thy flock: We beseech thee to send down upon all thy Bishops, the Pastors of thy Church, the abundant gift of thy Holy Spirit, that they, being endued with power from on high, and ever walking in the footsteps of thy holy Apostles, may minister before thee in thy household as true servants of Christ and stewards of thy divine mysteries; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.* (SUPPLEMENTARY COLLECT OF A BISHOP, P. 312)