

Second Sunday after Easter 2020 – The Good Shepherd

The Good Shepherd, in Greek ποιμήν ο καλός, is an image used in the today's Gospel pericope (John x, 1-21), in which Jesus Christ is described as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. We find this image and symbol throughout the Old Testament as well as the Gospels, St Paul, St Peter and the Apocalypse.

Is this a parable? I think not, because St John has altogether a different style from the Synoptic Gospels. The parable narrative is absent. It is more like an allegory. The Good Shepherd is one of the earliest representations of Christ found in early Christian art in the Catacombs of Rome. We see a young man carrying a lamb round his neck, which is archetyped in Roman paganism. It seems to be one of those examples of “baptised paganism” bringing a new meaning through Christ's revelation. By about the fifth century, the young man was very definitely Christ and no one else. In ancient Greece, the Κριοφόρος, the “ram-carrier” commemorated the solemn sacrifice of a ram.

The transformation into Christ the Good Shepherd involved the idea of carrying a lamb and looking after the flock of sheep. Today, this symbol makes us think of the notion of *vocation*, doing something out of conviction and devotion rather than for material gain. Christ was showing himself as looking after his disciples and caring about them enough to be ready to take risks and give his life.

It might seem offensive that the faithful of the Church are considered like sheep, peaceful animals that are not highly endowed with intelligence or individualism, and which follow their leader without question. It would seem, rather, that Christ took this farming image for the role of the Pastor, the Shepherd, rather than comparing people with unintelligent animals. Ask any farmer – animal husbandry is a highly skilled job and one that requires a lot of dedication. Another thing we should know is that in western Europe, sheep are put out to graze in closed fields and are only brought in for the winter. In other parts of the world, the shepherd leads his sheep on unenclosed land, in very much the same way as cowboys in America led their herds to the best pastures and kept a watch over them.

From the beginning, Jesus contrasts the good shepherd from the mercenary or hireling doing the job only for money. He is describing his mission, which is not literally leading sheep to

the places where they will find the best grazing, but the motivation for his mission, its very nature. He protects his people from enemies, both visible and invisible, like the shepherd keeps a look-out for wolves. Most profoundly, he is making the shepherd by vocation and the mercenary images of what he was doing in contrast to the clergy of the Temple, the Scribes and Pharisees. We remember how there was a lucrative trade in sacrificial animals and the way Christ showed his anger in chasing this business out from a holy house of prayer and reconciliation with God. No wonder the Jewish clergy were livid with anger!

The Kingdom of God was to be something radically different from an earthly kingdom. It was defined by love and self-sacrifice, by altruism. The religious leaders were guiding their people into discord. The Pharisees were confounded by acts of healing and mercy that violated the letter of the law about respecting the Sabbath, but followed a higher spirit of God's law. The Good Shepherd stands out from employees merely concerned for earning a living, looking after their own interests and security.

Here is where this archetype of Christ described the priestly vocation in the Church. The one who is *called* will voluntarily take risks and give his life for his sheep. This is a relationship of proximity and love. One thing we have all noticed is how remote the clergy in many churches have become. Firstly, the Bishop becomes inaccessible and hidden behind a wall of bureaucracy. Secondly, priests spend so much time in pointless diocesan and deanery meetings that they have little time for anything else. The modern corporate spirit saps the notion of vocation, and turns the priest into a functionary. In some countries, the local Bishop is like a parish priest for his people, and has few parishes under his oversight, still less bureaucracy other than a secretary, a chancellor, a treasurer and an archivist. Many dioceses in Italy and the rural areas of France were like that, and anyone could go and see the Bishop like his parish priest. This is a privilege we have in the Continuing Anglican Churches. My Bishop looks after a parish and does ordinary parish work in addition to administering the diocese and visiting priests like me.

Clericalism is a scourge in the Church, against which there are anti-clerical reactions in history. Clericalism is an exaggerated attitude toward the clergy, an excessive deference and an assumption of their moral superiority. It is also the arrogance of clerics who sin by pride. It is an attitude shared by many medical doctors, lawyers, civil servants, politicians and those who are distinguished by their education and social status. It can characterise another kind of

hirelings, not only seeking high incomes but also a sense of power over their clients. Certainly, we should esteem our clergy as those who are called to be leaders, sanctifiers and teachers. The priesthood is a gift from Christ, transmitted through the Apostles and the bishops of the Church, instituted in order to perpetuate Christ's mission in time. Priests celebrate Mass validly even when they are in sin or have turned to wickedness. The priesthood is both a spiritual "character" and a call to true spiritual nobility. This gift does not automatically make a man better morally or in terms of personality than anyone else. Some priests are truly in it for power, money and a position from which they can manipulate their victims. This is the hireling, the wolf in the flock, the fox in the chicken coop.

We do not have the right to tar all priests with the same brush. The calling is still sublime in spite of all the temptations to abuse it and do something alien to the purpose of the priesthood. We are not in this for competition, to be the richest and most powerful, but rather to *serve*. To command, we have first to learn to obey. That is the first principle of anyone becoming an Army officer, if he wants the respect of the men under his command. The real test of this noble humility is the willingness to sacrifice ourselves. This is what Christ means when teaching us the real meaning of the Good Shepherd. Authority has service for its finality and purpose.

And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.

This verse is often used by Roman Catholic apologists to identify the fold with their Church and the "one shepherd" with the Pope to further the cause of unity. It is a little more complex. What do the "other sheep" mean? What is the difference?

A more just interpretation would seem to be the difference between the simple faith of the man born blind, to whom he gave his sight, and the spiritual blindness of the clerocracy of Jerusalem. The false shepherds of Israel were the "others", who were not being condemned but *called*. The flock of Christ consists of those who listen, follow, love and learn in humility. "Other" sheep also refers to the *Gentiles*, those who were not Jewish and came from other places and spiritual traditions. Very often, these outsiders showed more humility and openness of mind than those who belonged to the people of Israel.

One flock and one shepherd does refer to the universal Church, not a building, not an institution but a sacramental Mystery that transcends time and human ambition.

I am very impressed by the change Benedict XVI made to the Good Friday prayer for the Jews in the older form of the Roman liturgy:

Let us pray also for the Jews: May our God and Lord enlighten their hearts, so that they may acknowledge Jesus Christ, saviour of all men.

Almighty and everlasting God, who desirest that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of truth, mercifully grant that, as the fullness of the Gentiles enters into Thy Church, all Israel may be saved.

No longer are we heaping the sins of the world on the Jewish people, we are inviting them to accept Christ as Saviour and thus ensure the salvation of Israel. This is important in a mission of love and mercy as the Good Shepherd gave as an example for us. These prayers are directly inspired by this final verse of today's Gospel. Let the Church be the point at which both Jews and Gentiles find peace and the love of Christ.