

4th Sunday of Easter (Year B): “Good Shepherd” Sunday.

1st Reading: Acts 4: 8-12: The name of Jesus is how we are saved;

2nd Reading: 1 John 3:1-2: Our future hope: to be as God is;

Gospel: John 10:11-18: A good shepherd knows his own; they know him.

I hope I do not offend, when I say I have some reservations about the traditional ‘Good Shepherd’ title for Jesus. In one way, it is simply because he had previously been a carpenter, not a shepherd! In a more important way, it is because I cannot see his followers (that is, all of us) as ‘sheep’. However, the idea of the shepherd goes back to the Old Testament - think of “The Lord’s my Shepherd” psalm. Also, it is basic to the work of a priest: in the USA, a parish priest is called a ‘pastor’ (ie ‘shepherd’); the adjective used to describe priestly work in a parish is ‘pastoral’. Pope Francis wants priests to have “the smell of the sheep” – in other words, to be deeply involved in people’s lives. However, I fear that calling us ‘shepherds’ has unintentionally led some priests to see parishioners as “sheep” in a condescending way – creatures with little free-will or common-sense. I suspect that many Catholics of my age will have experienced a sort of all-embracing control by some (but not all) priests, as well as by nuns and RC primary teachers - at least up till the 1960’s.

However, the main point behind the “Good Shepherd” is not control, but service. If we read this Sunday’s gospel in a Bible (or post-1970 missal), we see Jesus saying: “*I lay down my life for my sheep*”; and “*I know my own, and my own know me*”; there are even other sheep “*not of this fold*” that also need his help. The whole emphasis here is not that the sheep are stupid, but that the shepherd is a person who is reliable - and with an authority that is to be used in a spirit of service and self-sacrifice, to meet the needs of those whom he helps.

I should like to pick two ideas from this weekend’s gospel. The first is prayer. Yes, the Good Shepherd already knows us, but it takes prayer for us to get to “know” him. I still think the best definition of it is that in the old ‘penny’ catechism: “Prayer is the raising-up of the mind and heart to God”. In other words, it is simply focusing on the belief that God is present (the ‘mind’) and a desire to be with God (the ‘heart’). Nothing more. It means that prayer can include learnt-by-heart sets of words, made-up-on-the-spot words of our own, saying the rosary, using the psalms or devotional books (as in the Divine Office or Breviary). It could mean we look at a sacred image or crucifix, or stare at a great view or the night sky, and enjoy the presence of the God responsible for all this, and so on. The only important thing is the belief in, and the wanting of

God. It should not be surprising that individuals may like some methods of prayer, but cannot stand others – that is simply because we are all different. We cannot be so dogmatic as to tell people how they ought to feel, so the method we use to pray depends entirely on what suits our personality.

The Breviary apart, I have rarely found prayer very easy – perhaps it is through having a low boredom threshold, or a distraction-prone mind (they are probably linked!) – or for whatever reason. But the fact is that we offer little to God, in contrast to what he offers to us. When people are new to prayer, there is often a ‘buzz’ (some compare it to falling in love) but with time, the tendency to boredom can settle in. Perhaps this is like a couple realizing that they have little to talk about (that is very noticeable in holiday hotels!) but are content just to be in each other’s company. We can become like that in prayer – it is not a case of what we ‘achieve’, but of just being in God’s presence. Please do try it – if just for a small number of minutes per day. What matters is to stick at it.

The second idea from the gospel is ‘vocation’, or call - in particular, to the RC priesthood. This Sunday is traditionally one of the times bishops appeal for men (that is still the case in our Church!) to consider the priesthood – ie. do they feel ‘called’ by God to this role? What happened to me - starting senior seminary in 1965 (aged 17), then being ordained priest in 1971 (aged 23) - would never occur today. Now, bishops prefer people to have had some years of experience of life after high school (and/or university) before starting a training course. (In my youth, they were scared in case we were ‘corrupted’!) Whatever the training methods, it is important that church students have both a sense of identity with the people whom they will serve, and a relationship of prayer with the Good Shepherd, whose work they intend to share. In these secular times, this can be hard, so I sympathise with those offering themselves today – they need support, prayers & patience. Also, since the pandemic, our Church - along with most others - has suffered a loss of people.

However, ‘Good Shepherd’ Sunday is not just about call to priesthood: it concerns all our activity in the Church. In recent years, many have worked on live-streamed services, and internet material like these homilies. They do fulfil a need, allowing many to access worship and church teaching at home. But we also need the Good Shepherd’s help to renew personal contact with the “sheep” – especially those whose links with us are purely via the internet. As Pope Francis says, there is no substitute for meeting face-to-face. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

