

Easter 4
7/05/2006

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 4:5 - 12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16 - 24
John 10:11 - 18

The Good Shepherd

Frank McCourt, of *Angela's Ashes* fame, and his brother, lived in poverty stricken Ireland where the clergy manifestly had power. In an interview on radio Frank told how a woman who was having trouble with her alcoholic husband called in the priest. The interview between the two men consisted mainly in the priest giving the husband a jolly good thumping, and telling him there was more to come if he continued to stay on the bottle. However tempting it may seem to adopt this approach to pastoral care its revival would be very short lived.

Every year at this time the lectionary leads us to consider the Good Shepherd. Some ask whether this rural image is relevant to life in a technological urbanised society where satellites keep watch over us, phone taps and email decrypters monitor our electronic communications, and CCTV maintains oversight of our actions. Despite all these inventions the image of the shepherd remains a symbol for the relationship of pastoral care that is meant to exist between a minister and the people, or perhaps a bishop and the church.

There have been many interpretations of this relationship. The 17thC Puritan divine, Richard Baxter, listed seven pastoral functions: conversion of the unconverted; advice to enquirers; building up the already converted; oversight of families in congregations; visiting the sick; reproof of the impenitent; exercise of discipline. The expectation behind these seven points was that minister was the overseer and teacher who administered right doctrine amongst the flock. By the 19th century the possibility of maintaining this approach had begun to break down due to the emerging nature of modernity. The old style of pastoring was put under increasing pressure as the modern period welcomed pluralism, allowed for imprecision in doctrine, and valued divergent opinions. Catechizing in the old style was seen as indoctrination, which maintained a lifeless orthodoxy, seen as mere words or propositions.

In our time faith is an **individual quest** for understanding. What people think faith is is more important than what the faith as a received body of belief has been understood to mean. This has affected the ground rules for pastoral care. In our time the emerging forms of pastoral training emphasised a "client centred" approach, which brought some real benefits. It enlarged our grasp on what was involved in empathy and the dynamics of interpersonal communication. But its trend of supporting the journey of exploration was not always strongly attached to the content of faith. This very debate is going on the Medical Profession today. People are arguing that the number of hours taken to teach anatomy must not be sacrificed for the sake of introducing "touchy feely" subjects like cultural sensitivity, communication skills and ethics. It matters that a doctor knows where to find the heart as distinct from the kidneys. But it also matters that he or she is a human being, more than a brain full of medical facts. This very controversy is played

out every Saturday night on ABC TV's *Doc Martin* in which zero personal skill is administered by one who is full bottle on medical science.

What resources can the image of the Good Shepherd offer us which will help us in our life together as Christian people in the world today? The texts from John make two things clear. The mark of the Good Shepherd is that he lays down his life for the sheep. And that those who are recipients of such love, are called to express similar, responding love.

During Lent we focussed heavily on Jesus' willing act of self-giving, his laying down his life for the sheep. This action is the very reason the Shepherd is called Good. The risk and the cost of self-giving is expressed not just at the end, but is enacted in the whole of Jesus' life. Jesus' laying down of his life for us was an act of courage, like that of David his forebear who fought with lions and wolves that tried to attack the flock. The self-giving of Jesus also meant that he stood with the outcast and the powerless. He shared the dark days with them, actions which antagonised the powerful who became predatory forces. Jesus' courage and compassion flowed from one thing - his oneness with the Father. There is no other explanation for his life of self-giving but this. He gave his will over to the Father so completely that his life embodied the essence of God, revealed as self-giving love. He was no hired hand, no agency worker devoid of feeling for the people in his care. In him the love of the Father was expressed in a relationship of tenderness and necessity with those amongst whom he moved. His life of deep mutuality and inclusiveness revealed to us that the heart of God searches for us, despite the risk and the cost. And as a reflection of something greater, Jesus' life embodies what truth is for a Christian.

What the Gospel of John declares the Epistle of John turns into a summons. As we have been loved, so we are called to love. While the image of the shepherd is used as a symbol for the pastoral relationship that is meant to exist between a minister and the people, it is more than that. **All** who follow Jesus are drawn into his life as an expression the Father's self-giving. This can mean dramatic things, and it can mean ordinary things, but it will involve courage, risk and cost. Anyone who has had the experience of entering into the darkness of another's pain, loss or disruption in life will know something of what it means to lay down your life for another. It calls for self to be put aside in ways that are not spectacular, but they can be painful. It calls for steadfastness and tenderness when these might be the hardest things to manage, because someone else's dark valley can be an uncomfortable, even distasteful, place to share. People who dare will know how much it can feel a bit like the miners trapped in the cold, dark underground, never quite sure if freedom will come. And in the dark valley one will discover what it would mean to keep one's life; to save it from all danger, to refuse to share it with a neighbour.

The community that takes the name of Christ lives in the light of the Good Shepherd's life. This **does** mean attending to the body of truth that is related to him, for we understand God from this point of view. But there is something more which it is helpful for people who love ideas to hear. It means to **live in** this truth which is not just a source of joy, but a source of transformed deeds. The poet, Edwin Muir once surveyed Scottish Calvinism and wryly said: "The Word made flesh is here made word again". Living the life that follows the Good Shepherd does not mean filling the church with words that never become embodied in deeds. Rather, it means sharing a

story that reminds us we are loved by another. And it means being ready to be joyfully called away from living for ourselves. This story, these hymns and creeds and words mean nothing if there is no such result. They do have value if the word becomes flesh again, and lives amongst us to bring fullness of life to all. The power to bring this about is not our own, it comes from our relationship to Another. The frightening thing is that the power to refuse, is ours, and ours alone.