

Easter 4
3/5/2009

Mark the Evangelist

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

Of Shepherds and sheep: called to be present to lead to life

It is especially relevant that this is Good Shepherd Sunday. We have our AGM, a time when we reflect on our life as the people of God: a flock. And today Matthew becomes an Elder: one of us will be commissioned into a role, which touches on aspects of shepherding.

In the Bible shepherding and sheep are metaphors for the relationship between God and the people. God was the first shepherd and in the days when the Jews were nomadic they were like a flock. Moses was a shepherd whom God *called to lead the people to life*, a theme we joyfully celebrate in this season. When the people settled in the land, God called others to guide their community life and king David became the epitome of what it meant to be a shepherd. The rabbis said God seemed to think being a shepherd was the best preparation for being a ruler. If we put shepherd and ruler together, we begin to see the idea of pastoral includes serving in such a way that leads to life, and works to keep order within the household of God.

Shepherding has its foundation not in who we are, but in who God is for us. God's grace towards us - in creation, and as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a gift, which calls us into a community whose purpose is to praise and serve God. Our core business as Church is to live in the world reflecting the knowledge that in Christ, God has turned towards the world and claimed it, calling all people into a life that is full and free because it has been judged as loved by God. This is the foundation of our life together, the truth by which we live, the principle on which we seek to order our life, and it may or may not reflect the values of the world around us.

Although chosen from among the people the shepherds in Israel were set apart as distinct from the flock, not as lords but as servants. St Augustine put it well when he said: *I am a Bishop for you and a Christian with you*. There is an integral relationship between the one who serves and the community of faith – they exist for each other. But in terms of function there are some who have a particular role; to lead, guard and defend, to guide to refreshment and to restore to peace. These are strong, active roles, and they are nurturing. That is because to shepherd in the name of Jesus Christ means being called to embody love, patterned on Christ's self-giving.

On the basis of the Gospel for today, there are 3 points to highlight. The Shepherd defends the flock and is prepared to face danger for it, even to the point of laying down his life. Does this really apply to the people we call to office in our churches? In the long story of the people of God it has done. Leadership encountered the political danger of rulers such as Pharaoh and Herod and High Priests who sought to end the Apostles' teaching. The danger also included false teachers who broke into the community to introduce seductive thoughts and undermine the faith of the people. When John sets out the pattern of a Shepherd laying down his life for the sheep, it is not theory of atonement. It is a style of life in which *the commission of the shepherd was to be present to lead to life*. "To be present to lead to life" can mean a great many things, but ponder that thought. The authority *to lead to life* is the basis for leadership in the church, and it is derived from the cruciform shape of the Good Shepherd's life: his self-giving for us.

The Shepherd knows the sheep. The contrast is with hired hands – people who undertake leadership not for the sake of Love (relationship), but for the rewards of position and power. The hireling's attitude is the reverse of what is expected. The sheep are not objects the hireling's love. His highest priority is his own safety, not theirs. The hireling allows others to break in and steal, to scatter and damage the flock. As a congregation that elects some to roles, and hires some to others, there are things to bear in mind here.

In the world about us modern methods of handling people are often not based on relational principles: that is "knowing the sheep". In recent time the belief grew that any job can be outsourced, but we have had to learn hirelings don't necessarily share the values and beliefs of the sponsoring community. The worst example of this came from Governments that wanted Government to outsource everything, Prisons, and even the Military. The result was the scandals involving the mercenary organization Blackwater.

Whether elected or hired, those who shepherd in the name of Christ are called to engage with the community in a reciprocal relationship. They are to "know the names" of the people. This means being invested in the community, taking its concerns to heart, being prepared to lead in dangerous times, and not compromising or fleeing for safety at the first excuse. We are talking here about Love.

There are other sheep, not of this fold. The Shepherd is aware that the Gospel is bigger than our territory or community. This is very Johannine: in John God loves *the world*, we are called to do the same. Once the church felt it had to go to far places to find the other sheep. Now the "other sheep" live next door and walk our streets. This is exactly what has happened to us in this congregation. More people increasingly surround us. Some of them have forgotten the sound of the Shepherd's voice or have never known it, while others may have heard an inkling of it in tones that seem strange to us. As a Christian community can we live, trusting Christ has gone before us into life? Are we able to enter into the struggle of discovering what it means *to be present to deliver life* in this community? Do we have any idea what that would look like?

Fr Frank Brennan once gave a talk in which he described participating in a prayer service in a Detention Centre. As the group of male Asylum Seekers stood in a circle he asked them to name someone they wanted to pray for. Over half the group, many with tears in their eyes said they wanted to pray for their mothers. Frank Brennan watched the guards, some of whom were moved by this. His comment was that perhaps for the first time the guards – who were not our own guards but hirelings of the Government - were able to see Asylum Seekers not as depersonalised numbers, but as human beings with histories. They were real people who had homes, lives and families they loved. Suddenly they were revealed as people who had suffered profound losses that had gone unrecognised by the hirelings who guarded them.

Here leadership motivated by the love that leads to life evoked an inkling of community where it was least be expected to appear. This is ministry in the style of the Good Shepherd who does not minister by numbers, but relates to his sheep as whole beings and, through this particular quality of leadership imparts healing that reaches across the barriers created by every kind of difference: race, religion, language, power and status.

As members of the Good Shepherd's flock not all of us can be elected to rule, but each of us is called to embody the love we have received. In that sense we are all called *to be present to lead to life*, wherever we may be.
