

JESUS, THE GOOD SHEPHERD (St John 10. 1-18)

Easter is the time of the year when we think especially about lambs and good Shepherds. We used to live in Cumbria and walk in the Northern Fells and visit the areas around the Lake District. We often used to meet the local Farmers climbing the hills in search of their sheep, their faithful collies or sheep-dogs trotting patiently beside them, and we often watched them sending their dogs to herd the sheep and controlling them by voice or whistles; the sort of thing one can see being done so expertly on television in the sheep-dog trials.

A rather disturbing new approach to herding sheep was appearing on the scene shortly before we left the north of England and that was the young farm-hands riding their motor-bikes over the Fells to collect the sheep, the sheep-dogs racing madly by their side in order to keep up with them. A sign of the times I suppose, the modern urge for greater speed and mobility.

I remember reading somewhere that in Palestine, both in the time of our Lord and in present times, the Syrian Shepherd leads his sheep and the sheep respond to his call like dogs and trot along after him. The Syrian Shepherd can call the sheep to him, send them away, order them to the stream to drink and even shout to them to stop and they will instantly obey him. They can even make their sheep dance to the tune of a pipe. If they play a slow tune, the sheep make slow movements and if they play quickly the sheep actually skip. I have wondered since if this knowledge was the inspiration behind that very popular hymn tune "The Lord of the Dance". This picture of the Syrian Shepherd can help us to understand what Jesus meant when he said "I am the good Shepherd". It illustrates the relationship which exists between Jesus and those who believe in him, who love him and try to follow his way of life. When Jesus spoke of himself as the Good Shepherd, he also must surely have had in mind that lovely Psalm of David "The Lord is my Shepherd" David himself was once a Shepherd boy tending the sheep before he became King. The Psalmist speaks of the love and care of the Lord for those who are of his flock.

Jesus also said, "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep". In a story about shepherding in the Welsh mountains there was once a severe storm of wind and snow and some sheep were swept to the very edge of a rocky precipice. The Shepherd knew that the only hope of saving them lay in the young Shepherd boy going behind the flock and driving them slowly along the narrow strip between the snowdrift and the precipice and the Shepherd himself, at great risk to his own life, standing on the outer edge of the precipice to make sure none of the sheep tumbled over. But what made him do it? Surely not just the market value of the sheep. The Welsh Farmer has been born and bred to it. It is a way of life. He is the owner and his flock are his pride and joy. A few lines from the poem "Ode to a Shepherd" by the Welsh Poet Eifion Wyn answers that question:

The yoke of his daily task seems light to him,
The spread of the mountain land no weariness,
The greater the load, the heavier it be, the son of the soil
Is true to his stock – he loves his own..

He loves his own. This is the secret. In the Church we have a sense of belonging. Jesus cares for each and every one of us. When we give our lives into his safe-keeping we know that nothing can separate us from the love of God and “underneath are the everlasting arms.” And Jesus laid down his life for us. He came with great authority and power. He was a King but not a King of this world. His Kingdom was God’s kingdom. He took the form of a servant, humbling himself. He became as one of us.

He is not only the Shepherd but also the ‘sacrificial lamb’. In his death on the Cross, he died for us. He died to set us free, to forgive us our sins. He offered himself for us and for the sins of the whole world. In his final resurrection appearance to the Disciples by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus commissions Peter to be the leader of his flock, the little band of disciples who have been with him from the beginning and to whose care he entrusts his mission to the world. “Do you love me” he asks Peter three times, in reparation of Peter’s former denial of Jesus after Jesus had been arrested. “You know that I do” is Peter’s reply. “Feed my sheep, feed my lambs” Jesus says to Peter. It draws forth from Peter a response of love and commitment. This time Peter would not fail and he did not fail either.

To be a Christian is a life-long commitment and all of us at some time will have responsibility for the souls in our care, in our families, amongst our friends and in our Church congregations and a little ‘shepherding’ will be required of us from time to time and it is to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, that we will turn to for help and guidance.