

Easter 4: Good Shepherd Sunday

It is difficult for us 21st-century urbanites to feel the force of the 'good shepherd' vocabulary and imagery. I think part of our difficulty comes from that very self-conscious literary genre called 'pastoral' which romanticized shepherds and shepherdesses: Theocritus' *Idylls*, Vergil's *Eclogues*, Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* etc); parodied in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*. In it the pastoral life is characterized as being closer to an imagined golden age than contemporary experience. The setting is always a beautiful place in nature [*locus amoenus*], which in Christian era poetry came to be connected with the Garden of Eden (e.g. by Milton).

Among the best-known lines in the English pastoral genre are Christopher Marlowe's the *Passionate Shepherd to his Love* (1599):

*Come live with me and be my Love,
And we will all the pleasures prove*

Marlowe goes on to depict dancing shepherds' swains, beds of roses, birds singing madrigals etc. This sort of thing, compounded by sentimental and anaemic Victorian stained glass and Sunday School 'good shepherds', have debased Jesus' image.

We need to clear our minds of all that clutter as we hear Jesus say: 'I am the Good Shepherd'. All three elements of this over-familiar phrase could occupy a sermon; I'll leave 'I am' for now, apart from reminding you that the 'I am' sayings are a distinctive element of Jesus' teaching in John, asserting Jesus' oneness with God, Yahweh the great 'I am'.

So, the shepherd...

Because civilization in the time of the Patriarchs, and that of Israel until well after the conquest of Palestine, was largely pastoral, imagery of shepherding is frequent in the Bible. Even when agriculture became dominant in Israel, a nostalgia for the pastoral economy remained. Yahweh might be pictured as the tender of the vine and the planter of the seed, but he remained more familiarly the shepherd of the flock [Gen 49.24; Ps 23; Ps 78.52f.]. The Patriarchs, and Moses and David were all shepherds, so 'shepherd' became a figurative term for the rulers of God's people, a usage common throughout the Ancient Near East. Impious kings were scathingly denounced as wicked shepherds [1 Kings [22.17], Jeremiah [10.21; 23.1f.];] most memorably in Ezekiel 34: there God denounces the shepherds or rulers who have not cared for the flock (his people) and have plundered it, neglecting the weak, the sick and straying. God promises that he will take his flock away from these wicked shepherds and that he himself will become their shepherd. He also promises that he will judge between the sheep and the goats and will set his servant David (the *anointed* King, possibly translatable as 'Messiah') as the one shepherd over the sheep. I hope this all sounds very familiar to you as hearers of the Gospels. Ezekiel 34 concludes

'And you my sheep, are the sheep of my flock, and I am your God'

So this is what a Good Shepherd would look like: God, and his anointed king. But the phrase is not coined in the Old Testament.

What about 'good'? Here John chooses his word carefully. The shepherd is *καλὸς* [*kalos*].

Fr Raymond Brown, the great commentator on John, translates this as the 'noble shepherd', or

the 'model shepherd'. Καλὸς means beautiful, in the sense of an ideal or model of perfection (as in the 'good wine' of the wedding at Cana); it is that element of goodness which in Homer relates to heroism and bravery; it is used of genuine and flawless metals and jewels (like the 'fine pearls' for which the merchant was searching in the parable at Mt. 13.45); the cognate noun relates goodness to 'wholeness, health and order'.

This word claims of Jesus' *uniqueness*. He is the one *true* shepherd who has an absolute right to the title (linking him both to God and a Messianic king). John contrasts this with the many contemporary *claims* to be shepherds, e.g. the many shepherd gods of Hellenism, like Hermes (whose statues would later be adapted to portray Jesus in this role).

The basis of Jesus' right to be called the Good Shepherd, he tells us, is that he 'gives his life' for the flock. He overcomes the wolf and saves the sheep from being lost because of his fellowship with the Father. He takes his people into this fellowship through the mutual knowledge of flock and shepherd. Because he creates this fellowship and gives his life to overcome people's lostness, he is the true shepherd, competent and good and worthy of praise: 'noble', καλὸς. This willingness to die for the sheep is *not* found in the Old Testament shepherd imagery.

Think also of another image of which John is fond, now at the heart of the Mass: the *Lamb of God*, slain to take away the sins of the world. This image has much in common with the shepherd who lays down his life so that others may have life to the full, combining Old Testament shepherd imagery with that of Isaiah's suffering servant. Appropriating Passover imagery, it starkly expresses the complete identification of the good shepherd with his flock: he becomes one of them to die for them as a sacrificial 'lamb to the slaughter'.

Jesus is a shepherd in this lineage, but unique because his shepherding involves radical self-sacrifice, and not only, as the 'shepherd and flock' picture would suggest, for the sake of those who are already his, but also for those who '*do not belong*', a clear reference to that breaking down of social, religious, and ethnic barriers which the spread of the Gospel demands.

Our second reading, also from John (or at least John's church), picks up the self-sacrificial theme and gives us an application for it in our lives. Already by the time of writing some Christians have died for the faith, but not all are called to that form of witness. Scripture says that Christ died 'for us': we may just repeatedly proclaim it (as some preachers still do) or we can see implications for ourselves. Here is discipleship:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

... And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

1 John 3.16-18, 23

Love is the difference between mere existence and truly living because it is the application of grace, the enactment of faith. Without love we are not Christians. There are plenty of different ways to act on love if we use our imagination. The important thing is to put flesh on the words and *enact* them, like Jesus.