

Sermon preached at St. John the Baptist, Devizes, 17 April 2016 (Easter IV)

When I read the passage from St John which is today's Gospel reading I thought I had drawn the short straw. This chapter has the beautiful picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, but that comes before today's Gospel passage, which in fact does not use the word shepherd. I felt a bit sheepish. However, a good friend told me once that the best commentary of St. John is St. John himself so I shall feel free to go beyond today's reading and bring in the Good Shepherd. And I shall in due course bring in St. Paul.

The Lord says "I AM the Good Shepherd". Those of you who have read James Rebank's excellent book "The Shepherd's Life" will know how important a good sheepdog is to the team. Of course sheepdogs are admirable, as we have seen in programmes like "One man and his dog". But it would be absurd to think of Christ as the Good Sheepdog. Well, it would would't it? But, more important, the dogs control the sheep by manipulating them, coercing them, threatening the use of power. Jesus does not. He cares for his sheep because he knows his sheep and they know him: the sheep follow him because they know his voice. It might be more helpful and more relevant to use the word Pastor instead of Shepherd, a Pastor who cares for us who are his flock; and indeed who inspires us to care for each other. Jesus the Good Pastor lays down his life for his flock. I do not believe that Jesus is here looking ahead towards his Passion and death. That hour had not yet come.

Instead I think we can interpret this as meaning that the good shepherd, the true pastor, lays down his ego, drops his own agenda, his own preoccupations, to concentrate on the needs of the sheep, on those who need his attention. He needs humility, the humility of the one who contrives to be aware of the needs of others, the humility of the good listener.

In my experience a lot of people are not good listeners. They interrupt. While you are speaking they "rehearse" -- the main point of any conversation with them is what they are going to say. Sometimes "Oh -- that reminds of something that happened to me", and away they go. An example. Frances, my wife, lost her first husband when he had a heart attack at the age of 59. The local Parish Priest came

to see her. He spoke at length of his own heart problems, and also of his own wonderful marriage. She heard him out. But what a contrast with Our Lord, the Good Shepherd. He listened. He always responded to what he knew were the needs of the other person. Here in St. John's we are fortunate in having priests, L.P A.s and others whose pastoral work is inspired by the Good Shepherd, who obey the Lord's new commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you".

George, whom we welcome as he joins the Christian family here today, will always find a shepherd in that family.

St. Paul was one of the great pastors. He spent much time and energy and what we now call "people skills", creating a church then moving on. But he did not lose touch. He contrived to be aware of their problems and wrote to them, not just a quick note (except for the little gem he wrote to Philemon), but substantial masterpieces. I quote his letter to the Phillipians:

"If there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being of full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross".

In making himself nothing, emptying himself of ego, in his utter surrender of himself in love and loving service Jesus discloses and lays bare the ground of God's being and of human being as ... love. He tells us "I and the Father are one". The essence of these words of Jesus is not what they say about him but what they say of God. Bishop Ramsey put it thus: "God is Christlike, and in him is no unchristlikeness whatsoever."

It used to be natural to see God as totally in control of his creation, where everything goes according to plan, a God whose providence governs and guides all things, but whose reasons we cannot fathom. In our prayers we address Almighty God, Lord God of Hosts, Lord of all Power and Might, and so on.

Professor Macquarrie has written “humility and the form of a servant are not disguises of God and not unnatural to him, but of his very essence. And this would mean that he cannot draw near as a prince or even a professor, but only in some lowly and obscure form”. Substitute “Christ” for “God” and most of us would have no difficulty in accepting that. But a humble God? We need something more powerful to believe in. As Bishop J. V. Taylor puts it: “ God must be the supreme potentate among the world rulers, the master-mind above all clever controllers. God, unlike us, can do exactly as he pleases in the world at any time. God fixes everything. Only get Him on your side and you can’t lose. A humble God, a vulnerable God, a defeated God is just not enough for us. But that is our God. Later in John's Gospel Philip asks Jesus “Show us the Father and we shall be satisfied. Jesus replies : “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father.”

I shall close with the only part of the Epistle to the Hebrews which I understand.

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip us with everything good, that we may do his will working in us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.