

What can a Shepherd do?

Psalm 23, John 10:11-18

22 April 2018

There are some interesting speculations about the question of whether Jesus wanted to found a church and if so, what kind of church did he have in mind? You can find Bible passages giving some indications this way or that, but almost everybody agrees that the church we have now is not what Jesus envisaged. Perhaps this is not surprising. We are far removed from Jesus' roots, which were steeped in first century Jewish faith with its given historical and cultural background. And though his first followers could live and worship in small, intimate communities where Jesus' new way could spread rapidly, once Christianity has grown and became the religion of the Roman Empire the character of its life was bound to change. It became an organisation, an institution with all that it entails. We ourselves then, our local church community here is also a product of that great change.

Today we have been re-commissioning our elders for their special job of leading this church through the instrument of eldership. We have just heard what the elders' responsibilities are: they are to share with the ministers in the pastoral oversight and leadership of the local church. The statement reveals the traditional structures of our church and there is also a hint here about us being part of a wider community of God's people. In this church we also have something called the 'team meeting', which is a smaller body than the elders' group and their task is to bring matters to and prepare for elders' meetings and church meetings. I have mentioned it before that some people refer to this meeting in a joking way as 'the inner cabinet'. Now I know that it was really said in jest, but it still indicates that we tend to think of church structures, the organisational tools of our life together in terms of political structures, or structures of secular bodies, like banks, companies, clubs, firms of one sort or another. Consequently, we may be tempted to think that churches are or should be working on those kinds of models. We know quite a lot about them, in our working lives most of us have been, or are still part of these organisations.

Yet, when we come to our gospel reading for today we find a different model: the model of a sheep under the leadership of a shepherd. And we have to ask ourselves has that different model got

anything to offer to us when we think about how best to run our life together as the people of God in a sub-urban Western church in 2018. Does our experience of trying to follow Jesus faithfully match the experience of the early Christian communities, like that of John's community, which produced the Fourth Gospel? It seems that for them life together was not about structures and organisations but about relationship. On one side of that relationship in clear focus was Christ, the good shepherd, who was the undisputed leader, but everything the shepherd was and did had found its meaning in the best interest of the sheep, that is the community, the way they felt known, loved and cared for.

When I was first approached by Andrew Busby, our previous minister to come to this church to share in the work of ministry, the two of us had a preliminary discussion about how it all might work out. I remember raising my concern about possible theological differences between us and how we might deal with them. Something he said in reply stayed with me ever since: "So long as we both agree that the interest of the congregation is paramount, we should be all right". A truly wise pastoral stance, something that ministers, elders, and, in fact, all of us do well to keep in mind. The role of the shepherd, the pastor, the elder, is not about status, they can only be called 'good' if they continually look to the best interest of the flock entrusted to them.

Talking of goodness, Jean Vanier, the French RC priest, who founded the L'Arche community draws attention to the more nuanced meaning of the original Greek word *kalos*, that is translated in the Bible as 'good', in connection with the Good Shepherd. It covers things like *noble, beautiful, perfect, precious* or even *wonderful*. It also encompasses such values as *attractively good, good that inspires/motivates* others to embrace what is lovely, and *such as one ought to be*. These were then the attributes those early Christians experienced in the way God, in the risen Christ, influenced their lives. It is important for those of us, who are engaged in any kind of pastoral work to know and try to emulate this enlarged, richer meaning of goodness. Our caring should not just be a duty, but have this attractive, precious, inspiring quality about it.

But what else can make a Good Shepherd, or a good pastor? The previous verses of John 10, are not included in the Lectionary reading, but they shed more light on the nature of the relationship between shepherd and sheep. The sheep hear their Master's voice,

who calls them by name. In the world of drama there is nothing more heart-wrenching than someone calling out and not being heard. I have been watching a drama series on the TV in which the main character is a profoundly deaf young woman, who is heavily reliant on her 'hearing' guide dog. One day, through the twists and turns of the story, the dog goes missing and accidentally gets locked in a big warehouse. The young woman goes in search of her trusted and life-saving companion and at one point she stands right in front of the warehouse where the dog is, with her back to it. The dog has now found an open grating, through which he can see the woman and he is barking his little heart out to attract her attention. But, of course, being deaf, she cannot hear him. It is an unforgettable scene.

Well, the Good Shepherd keeps calling, but it is possible to be deaf to his voice. Some of us, in the inside, within the Christian community, may be deaf to his voice because we value the comfort and cosiness of the sheepfold and fear the dangers of the outside world even though that is also the place where the essential food is for an abundant life. The Good Shepherd wants to lead us out; he goes ahead of us and expects us to follow him (vs 10:3-4). He is also calling his other sheep that are not yet within the sheepfold. They may be deaf to his voice because they think he would tell them 'do this and do that, or don't do this and don't do that'. They may fear he would restrict their freedom and keep them isolated from the rest of the world. Yet, for the Good Shepherd, there is but one flock and he calls them all because he wants them to be free 'to go in and out', to find rich pastures *and* remain safe. And the good news is that our temporary loss of hearing is not enough to stop the Good Shepherd's determination to feed us and keep us safe.

The end of the TV drama I was talking about is quite telling. It shows how the dog rushes up and down, desperately trying to find a way out to defend his charge, the deaf woman, who is in mortal danger without her dog. Eventually, he finds an opening and without a second thought he throws himself down from his three-storey high position into what looks like certain death. - Of course, we are in the world of make-belief here, so let me relieve the anxiety of the dog-lovers among us: as it happens, there is a strategically positioned heap of rubbish bags waiting for collection under the high window, so the dog's fall is softened and he escapes without a scratch. But that does not distract from his heroic willingness to saving the person he so loves and cares for even at the cost of his own life.

This leads us back to where we started. We said the hallmark of the Good Shepherd is that he always looks to the best interest of the flock. We can add that this links him to the many OT images of the Shepherd. Our first reading from Psalm 23 is just one example of them. But Jesus, the Good Shepherd *par excellence* goes beyond those images, for no OT texts describe the shepherd as one who is willing to defend the flock to the point of laying down his own life for them. I wonder if you noticed that the expression 'to lay down his life' appeared 5 times in the 8 verses of our Gospel reading Craig has read to us a few minutes ago. This is what lends a special poignancy to this Lectionary reading about the Good Shepherd in the Easter season: the shattering experience of the crucifixion followed by that of the empty tomb, which was still fresh in the minds of the early followers of Jesus. These were the events that filled the metaphor of the Good Shepherd with real content for them. It also brings to mind John's account of the Passion, which is different from the other Gospels. In John, when the soldiers and the Temple police come to arrest Jesus, there is no need for Judas' kiss to identify him. Jesus takes the initiative and all the responsibility. He steps forward and shielding his disciples identifies himself with one of the famous 'I am' sayings: "I am the man you want, - he says - let these others go". (John 18:8) This is not a shepherd, who runs away and abandons the sheep when he sees the wolf coming.

Today we give thanks for our elders and for all those who take on pastoral responsibilities in our church. As we ask God's blessing on them and acknowledge the necessity of having to work within certain organisational structures, we boldly and without apology recommend to them the ancient model of shepherd and sheep relationship. We all need good, loving and wise shepherding and as Jesus' first followers discovered, once you experienced it and have been nourished by it the next step is to grow up and become a shepherd yourself, a servant-leader for others. May God give us the strength and the courage to do so.

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