

Shepherd of Souls

A Sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, on Sunday, 15th May 2011 (4th of Easter) by Father William Davage, Priest Librarian and Custodian of the Library

EVEN though we are fully aware that biblical imagery, metaphor, simile and analogy is, of its nature, drawn from a pre-industrial and a rural rather than an overwhelmingly urban landscape, it remains somewhat disconcerting to be categorised, as we are, as sheep. It is rarely flattering to be compared to a sheep. Sheep are not usually regarded as intelligent animals. Their herd, or rather, flock, mentality, their tendency blindly to follow a leader, as often as not another sheep who has been simply the first to move, the alacrity with which they can panic and flee, combine to characterise them as pretty low in the animal I.Q. stakes. However, they should take heart – and sheep’s heart is delicious – they should take heart, as should we who are sometimes compared to them: research shows that sheep are just below pigs and on a par with cattle in their I.Q. – so that is reassuring.

Old Testament imagery tended to focus on the People of God, tribal and chosen, in a covenantal relationship, but in the New Testament new images are employed because there is a new dispensation, a new covenant, a new centre because Christ has become the head of this people, his Body, the Church. And around this central fact is grouped images taken from the life of the shepherd or from the cultivation of land; taken from the familiar, the everyday, connecting with the ordinariness of daily living as it is experienced. So we find Christ as the Vine: “I am the true vine”¹ with his people making up the branches. And, most especially, we find the image of Christ the Good Shepherd, and, here this morning, Christ as the door to the sheepfold: “I am the door of the sheep ... if anyone enters through me, he will be saved.”² Christ is the door to the sheepfold, the sheepfold being the image of the Church. Christ is the sole and necessary gateway. The Church is also, in this image, “the flock of which God himself foretold that he would be the shepherd, and whose sheep, even though governed by human shepherds, are ... nourished and led by Christ himself, the Good Shepherd, the Prince of Shepherds, who gave his life for his sheep.”³

Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist, the binding principle, are the ways that we enter into the fold and become part of the flock, one of the sheep in the pasture of the Church looking towards the Good Shepherd. Here is the seed, the beginning of the Kingdom promised of God, the coming together of this flock which Jesus has gathered, the flock whose shepherd he is. But within this flock, and this is where we hope that the analogy of “we like sheep” breaks down, or at least shows its limitations, within this flock we are not an undifferentiated mass, a conglomerate of dim creatures. God in Christ calls each of us by name and knows each of us by name: “the sheep hear his voice and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep will follow him.”⁴ We are called by name in Baptism, we are identified and we are known by name. Part of that named identity is our soul.

In Scripture the soul often refers to human life, or the entire human person, in all its complex humanity. It is more than personal characteristics, more than our personality.

¹ John 15: 1

² John 10: 13

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 754

⁴ S. John 10: 1 – 10

Personality and character, of course, give our human frame of flesh and blood and bone definition and identity. The soul is that animating spirit which breathes life into our moral as well as our physical being, the innermost and most profound aspect of our human being, that which is of greatest value, that which makes us what we are, that by which we are most closely and especially and personally configured to the image of God. And Christ is the Shepherd of our Souls, the guardian and overseer of all that we are, all that we are meant to be. "For you were straying like sheep, but how now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls."⁵

In this significant image of the Shepherd of Souls, Christ articulates, illustrates and personifies what is the essence, what is at the heart of his priesthood, and Christ is our great high priest, and because it is his priesthood, it is our priesthood as well. We all share in the priesthood of Christ. This is the priesthood of all believers, that marking us out for holy things, that sanctification of our lives in service: we are a royal priesthood, we are a priestly people. Too often Christians forget that vocation and try to leave all the priestly aspects of our discipleship to priests like Father Jonathan, Father Barry or me, or our Chaplains, or our Parish Priests, to slough off their own responsibilities. The Church, the Body of Christ, that is all of us are by definition and inescapably a priestly, consecrated people, a holy people with all that demands and requires of sacrifice and service, obligation and duty. That universal priesthood is indelibly achieved in Baptism, where we are "consecrated to be ... a holy priesthood."⁶

But, of course, there is within that universal priesthood, that all-encompassing priesthood, the specific priesthood which is conferred by the Sacrament of Holy Order; a ministerial priesthood to which some but not all are summoned and called, which exists to serve the universal priesthood of all the faithful people of God in particular and specific ways. Priests serve in the name and in the person of Christ, that *alter Christus*, both at the altar and away from it in the midst of the community of the faithful, the communion of the faithful. "The priesthood is a sacrament of the divine presence; the priest stands for Christ. So the unchanging permanence of our priesthood gives expression to the unchanging permanence of Christ's divinity."⁷ This ministerial priesthood is exercised through the celebration of the sacraments, the teaching office of the Church, in pastoral service (tending the flock), and by his presence, his being. Priesthood is essentially about being rather than doing.

Of course it is true that priests do many things. There are many practical, mundane, bureaucratic, managerial, cafeterial, librarian and archival tasks that allow an institution or an organisation to operate. But however important these tasks may be, however much time they take, they could be done by anyone; they are not improved nor achieved by being done by a priest. They are not an expression of his priesthood, even though they are sometimes necessary pre-requisites for the proper exercise of that priesthood. A priest's concern is with the sacramental economy, the celebration of the sacramental rites and the dispensation of divine grace. That divine, sacramental economy is concerned with the greatest attributes of God: God is love : God is mercy. These are the great and lofty themes which underpin, which provide context for the exercise of priestly ministry: they are the means and the ends of the priestly enterprise. Those repetitions of the dispensation of grace, love, reconciliation and absolution form a kind of divine tedium as well as an inestimable privilege. It is in this way that the priest is the guardian, the shepherd of souls

⁵ I Peter 2: 25

⁶ Lumen Gentium 10 §1

⁷ Lumen Gentium §2

because he stands at the critical point of articulation between the divine and the human, between heaven and earth, salvation and condemnation. In the sacraments, most particularly but not exclusively the Eucharist and Confession, priests are the point of contact for men and women between the mysterious and the concrete, the sublime and the earthly, the mystery and the worldly, the human and the divine, both in and out of time.

Priests are called out from their communities. It is the community that nurtures and authenticates the vocation. Vocations do not and cannot exist in a vacuum. Because vocations come from communities and because priests live and work within communities, they are not divorced or separated from the tensions, even the temptations that arise in our common humanity. The human impulses and frailties are not removed, nor neutralised by the laying-on of hands in the Sacrament of Holy Order.

My standard comment to those who tell me that they feel that they may have a vocation to the priesthood is, "Well, if you insist on throwing your life away." It has a calculated degree of ambiguity about it. Submitting to a vocation does entail throwing away one sort of life and embracing another and entering into different kinds and different sets of relationship. There are limitations, constraints and disciplines that have to be observed and understood and accepted, which sometimes conflict with personal preferences or natural instincts and aspects of personality and character. But there can be no greater privilege than to throw away your life (or throw away one kind of life) for the sake of Christ, his Church and his people, even to waste your life – at least in the eyes of an uncomprehending world – to waste your life for Christ; to spend your life for Christ; to spend your life in the service of Christ and his people. Christ poured out his life as a libation and that is the call to the priest to emulate that outpouring, that liberality, that grace and love. Each of us has to live out a vocation to follow Christ wherever we find ourselves, in whatever circumstances we are engaged, in whatever state we are. That is an inescapable consequence of making the decision and the commitment to follow Christ. Those in the ministerial priesthood are called to specific responsibilities of service, additional tasks for the good of the whole Body of Christ. The work of sanctification and dispensation can be unremitting. There can sometimes be an overwhelming sense that we are engaged on a fruitless discharge of duty, a meaningless treadmill. Moments of doubt and inadequacy invade from time to time: we would not be human if they did not. Worldly fame and recognition, ambition as the world would understand it are not the touchstones of satisfaction or reward or happiness or blessedness. Fidelity in the ministration of the sacraments, befriending and caring for people, meeting them often at points of crisis or need, reconciling, healing, teaching, praying, result in an absorption in selfless, satisfying and valuable activity, so much so, that it is reward enough to know that you are about Christ's great work.

Everything that I have said about priests applies with equal force, perhaps with greater force, to bishops.