

**In days of yore
If each had their own
It was stamped through him like Blackpool through rock
In a nutshell
Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery...**

It is true of any collection of proverbs and aphorisms that it can be difficult to discern a uniting theme. What do all these sayings have in common, that leads to them *being* gathered together in one place. In this case, one thing all *the phrases you have just heard* share is simply that they are acknowledged cliches. In fact according to one popular periodical's online poll they are 5 of those cliches honoured with a place in the current top100. There is no end to our appetite for league tables it seems...

None of us, of course, in the words of Reginald Perrin's boss CJ, got where we are today without *avoiding* cliches like the plague, but what exactly qualifies something *as* a cliché? Our friends round the corner at the OED employ terms like hackneyed or overused - to define one as something rendered uninteresting by excessive repetition. But if it is simply a question of repetition, then what is there to distinguish cliché from...*creed*, what stops our ancient liturgical refrains like the Kyries or even the words and actions of our Eucharistic devotion from *themselves* being mere cliché?

One of the other words we might reach for to grapple with this old chestnut is...stereotype - a term taken from the same context that cliché is said to have as *its* origin - the world of our OUP friends round the corner - the technical vocabulary of printing. There, in days of yore, any particularly well used phrase, rather than being *individually* typeset - letter by letter - on each occasion of its use, would instead be made up as a solid - *steros* - pre-formed block (of type) to be deployed as one unit. And it's easy to see how this came to be applied to our much maligned category of speech - clichés are not carefully constructed to suit particular circumstance or deliberately and painstakingly laid out in an age-old order but simply borrowed on block from somewhere or someone else.

In fact, the artist who occupied our thoughts last Sunday, Salvador Dali once said that: "The first man to compare the cheeks of a young woman to a rose was obviously a poet; the first to repeat it was obviously an imbecile." Cliché as mere mimicry - simply borrowing what was original to another. Although IF EACH HAD THEIR OWN Dali's pithy observation itself turns out to be merely a repetition of the words of Gérard de Nerval who had previously said the very same thing about roses, and poets, and imbeciles. And for that matter this very sermon is not its own original.

On the other hand, *all* communication - language itself - *depends* on a degree of passing on something heard from another, and sharing a set of common terms and units of speech.

And *all* of *this* is of particular relevance to us, because here we are in the *business* of imitation, of borrowing what was original to another, and passing on faithfully what we have received. We insist on taking our identity from a tradition, and we repeat our creeds and liturgies...well, religiously, such that as the liturgical year clicks around its cycle of repetitions, we are confronted each week with language and ideas that are - or at least appear - increasingly familiar.

So today when we hear that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, we are not being shown something new, but something that has been known, and spoken of, as our readings themselves demonstrate, over and again across thousands of years. And immediately we are presented with the challenge - which applies to every aspect of the Original Word made flesh: if this crucial image of Christ is *not* to be reduced to mere cliché, then how *are* we to hear it, and communicate it, and act upon it?

Well, in this case, we might, for example, take the time to assemble the elements of type that made it what it was for the writer of our Epistle or of our Gospel. We could do worse than explore the Old Testament allusions of Psalm 23, or the Psalmists prayer to the Shepherd of Israel, or Isaiah's prophecies of the One who will gather his lambs in his arms...

Or we could meditate on the comforting echoes of the same idea in Jesus self-description as He who came to seek and save the lost, like a shepherd refusing to let even one of his flock be discounted...

But equally we *might* profitably focus on what is *surprising* rather than familiar in this image we've encountered a thousand times. People like you and I may be inclined to nod knowingly at the idea of a shepherd giving his life to save some of his sheep, but anyone who has *been* or *known* an actual shepherd, or encountered the utter self destructive stupidity of actual sheep, or just anyone who has eaten a shepherds' pie, would realise this is idea not 'something so sensible as to be trite', it is, in fact, a complete absurdity. The shepherd doesn't live or die for the sheep, the sheep live to die for the shepherd - to feed and clothe him and those he loves...the apparently *familiar* idea Jesus expounds in the Gospel, is in fact a shocking reversal of the norm - an affront to common sense - every bit as surprising one imagines (in a first century pastoral context) as the idea of a Good Samaritan, or of God being born of a woman, or hanging on a tree...

And in just that way we might want to remind ourselves - as *believers* in Jesus as God with Us - of the blasphemous shock for his peers of a flesh and blood human being appropriating the role of shepherd of Israel, or promising to keep people safe in a way only God could promise to do - the sort of shock that makes people reach for stones, or resort to accusations of demon possession...

And yet, whilst pausing to consider these things might protect us from turning an icon of Christ into a clip art snapshot of a kindly man with a sheep on his shoulders, perhaps the best way to allow this aspect of Jesus as shepherd of our souls to become creed and not cliché - is to see in it - in that very image of the shepherd carrying a sheep - the picture and it's negative, to allow the paradox of this very unusual shepherd, like those of the Good Samaritan and the Incarnate God, to fully *develop* for us, indeed to fully develop *in* us...

Because ultimately, what makes this shepherd good is that he is one of the sheep...for Peter and most of all for John - the shepherd crucially is the lamb.

He leads us by being one of us. He guards our souls from the ravaging wolf of our own animal nature by showing us a more excellent way to be human, by dying for us and calling us to give our lives for others in response, by being the ensample - the type - of our true characters, the original embodiment of the very thing that should be stamped through *us* like Blackpool through rock: namely the quality, not of being immovable in our strength - or fixed in our mindless adherence to rules learned by rote from men - not of being inflexible in our soulless repetition of mantra - not in short the *sterile* quality of *solidity*, but the *vital* one of *solidarity*.

Solidarity, if I might borrow on block from Sam Wells, is our faith in a nutshell. It is what salvation looks and feels like and the key to our movement into its depths.

In the early 1980's the Polish priest Jerzy Popieluszco was following the template of the good shepherd of his flock when he took up the rallying cry of the Solidarity movement, and stood alongside striking workers as a representative of the one institution the communist authorities in that country couldn't simply dismantle by force - the Catholic Church. His act of solidarity - following the ensample of Christ - famously cost him his life in just the way Peter predicts in our Epistle. But the solidarity of the good shepherd is played out, as Peter also emphasises, not just in these dramatic *final* acts of a life, but in *all* the scenes and daily details of giving our lives for others...

Solidarity is what happens when someone who doesn't have to be in hospital comes into the ward you wish you weren't in, to sit with you, it is what happens when you are unpopular or abandoned and someone refuses to believe what everyone says about you and stands by you, or more tellingly still it is what happens when someone knows *all* the truth about you and stands by you anyway.

Solidarity is all the ways we seek to stand alongside those who are in pain or sorrow, those who are facing cruelty, or fear or the unknown; it is all the times we are willing to be contaminated or condemned by association in order to embody the love of God in someone else's suffering; solidarity is what the church is formed *from* and called to - standing alongside one another, standing alongside those in need, standing alongside God in Christ who stands with us...

Solidarity is the heart of the image of the Good Shepherd - the shepherd who is the lamb - and it is the character he is determined to see inscribed *in the hearts* of his flock.

But what is more, this solidarity - with Christ - and *in Christ with others* - is not only what he is leading us into, *it* is what will guide us and protect us even as we daily endeavour to follow his steps...

Because for us the very thing that will stop our creeds becoming mere cliché is copying and repeating - it is rehearsing and increasingly inhabiting the role of our Good Shepherd.

Just as anyone who wishes to speak of love is always in danger of finding their most keenly felt emotions turning into clichéd phrases and Hallmark sentimentality, so we are always at risk of our faith in the God who *is* Love, and *it's* expression, solidifying into mere superstition or banal platitudes.

And the only thing that shepherds us away from that danger is what is laid out for us in the Collect appointed for Good Shepherd Sunday: the two inseparable ways the Eternal Word Love is written in living letters and on tablets of flesh - the *twin* aspects of the Life laid down for us: the fact that it is *both* the source - the fire that changes our base metal into gold. And the mint - the shining stamp and template - that is slowly pressing its cruciform shape into our newly recast forms.

Ultimately what is carrying us into salvation - is not *just* the cosmic event of Christ's sacrifice for sin - which we are learning to discern and enter into ever more fully through our sacramental remembering of it...

It's not *just* the establishment of shalom by his atonement, which we are training ourselves, by practice, to most thankfully receive...

It's not *just* the reality of the descent into death and raising to glory of the Word made flesh, which allows and teaches us to cherish all the forms in which God reveals himself to us, without turning any of them into cliché by clinging onto them.

In short, it is never *just* his sacrifice, but always also his ensample.

It is *both*: the font and furnace of new human living in the Lamb as Slain upon the throne; *and* the die - the pattern - of that godly life revealed to us in Christ, which when we repeat and rehearse our creeds and liturgies we are actively seeking to have embossed on our psyches - the imprimatur of love stamped through us by *practising* solidarity and self-giving.

The curious image under the Office tab on Discord - which looks like a baldacchino - like the covered tabernacle of our own blessed sacrament chapel - with a strange mechanical device in place of the altar - is in fact a picture of the Royal Mint's original steam coin press: chosen because the focus and fullness of our worship is always found in these two indivisible things - his sacrifice and ensample - the altar and the anvil - the foundry and the forge of our faith - recognising and receiving with thanks the consummate atonement of Christ *and* having the hallmark of his loving patience pressed into us by the daily endeavour of copying him...

So when on this Sunday or any other we find the potentially clichéd image of the Good Shepherd held up before us it is not just to reassure us - as we are continually wandering out of the way - that we are in the pastoral care of the eternal priest; but also to remind us that the thing which shepherds our souls, which protects us from our old selves, which leads us into fullness of life, and holds us together as the flock of God's pasture - *is* the very thing that is being impressed upon us by repetition - the self giving love of Christ - the Shepherd/Lamb as source and sustenance of the new life we are passing over into, *and* as its pattern.

Not, in the end, a ghostly ideal or a rigid stereotype - but the living *archetype* of the new way of being human.

Almighty God, who hast given thine only Son to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace that we may always most thankfully receive that his inestimable benefit, and also daily endeavour ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.