

Homily for Easter IV - 2020

Today is often called Good Shepherd Sunday because of Our Lord's statement in the Gospel ... *"I am the good Shepherd; the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep."* (John 10:12)

Religious imagery depicting Christ as the good shepherd abounds and in it we usually see Jesus either cradling a lamb in his arms or sometimes carrying one over his shoulders. A good deal of this art is syrupy and sentimental and not really helpful in forming any sort of realistic image in our minds of what being a 'good shepherd' might mean. Modern farming practise offers no help either as a shepherd is a person of the past in this county at least. Most of us are far removed from any sort of animal husbandry these days beyond perhaps keeping a pet dog, cat or a possibly a bird.

That indefatigable traveller, journalist and social commentator, H.V. Morton, in 1923, wrote a very popular and successful book bearing the title **"In the steps of the Master."** It was a book about his travels in the Holy Land. In it he vividly describes the shepherds of the Holy land. The sheep did indeed follow their master – he led them out to pasture daily and back to the safety of home or to a sheepfold in the hills at eventide. The sheep did listen to his voice and took no notice of the voice of any other person. Each sheep had its name that it recognised and the shepherds spoke to their sheep in a unique and strange language, a mixture of guttural sounds, whistles and soft calls. When the sheep were out in the hill country all day and all night in the summer months, the shepherd was quite literally the door or gate of the sheep fold where they were corralled each night. He slept right across the only opening to the fold so no sheep could get out and no beasts or robbers could get in.

The shepherds Morton met and described were equipped with a scrip or bag made of an animal skin in which his food and a very few other essentials were carried. Each shepherd had a sling and they were legendary in their accurate use of the sling in defence or attack and in attracting the attention of individual sheep. When the boy David felled the Philistine giant with one stone to the middle of the forehead (see I Samuel 17:49) it was no lucky shot. That's the sort of skill shepherds had with the sling!

He also had a staff which was a short wooden club often studded with nails. This was his weapon which he used to defend his flock from beasts and robbers. And he had his rod which was like the shepherds crook which could be used to catch any sheep for whatever reason, usually to inspect it closely for injury and the like.

The life of these men was a very hard one. The shepherd was never off duty. Constant vigilance, fearless courage, patient love and care for his flock were the characteristics of these men. They were expected to take their responsibility for their sheep with total seriousness. The prophet Amos (Amos 3:12) speaks about a

shepherd rescuing two legs or a piece of an ear out of a lion's mouth because the law laid down that if a sheep is torn by beasts let him bring it as evidence." (Exodus 22:13) The idea being that the shepherd must bring home proof that the sheep had died as a result of an attack and that he had been unable to prevent the death. The youthful David told King Saul how when keeping his father's sheep he had battled the lion and the bear. (I Sam 17:34-36).

Sometimes the shepherd had to do more than risk his life, he had to lay it down when thieves, robbers or wild beasts came to despoil the flock. In 1859 W. M. Thomson, a protestant Missionary to the Middle East, published a book called "**The Land and the Book**" It was his memoirs of travels in the Holy Land. This book, though almost entirely forgotten today, became the second most popular book on sale in the USA in the 19th century (surpassed only by the anti slavery book 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852.) Thomson has this to say about shepherds in the holy Land in the mid 19th century.

"I have listened with intense interest to graphic descriptions of downright and desperate fights with savage beasts.. the faithful shepherd has to put his life in his hand to defend his flock. A poor shepherd last spring, between Tiberias and Tabor actually fought three Bedouin robbers until he was hacked to pieces with their knives and died among the sheep he was defending." Did good shepherds lay down their lives for their sheep? Indeed they most certainly did.

Our Lord was using language that everyone would have understood only too well when he said.... *"I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep"*. It is not an abstract image, or a pious ideal, on the contrary, it was a plain statement of fact in our Lord's time and right up to the 20th century and possibly still the case in certain places today.

Throughout the Old Testament, references to God as shepherd of his people abound. The 23rd psalm being by far the best known example but there are dozens in the Psalms and in the writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. This imagery passes into the New Testament and is used by each of the gospel writers, St Paul, St Peter and the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews. The word Pastor, a word we are more familiar with than shepherd these days, owing to its extensive use to denote members of the church with ministerial responsibility, is itself the Latin word for - shepherd.

William Barclay says, *"the word shepherd should paint a picture to us of the unceasing vigilance and patience of the love of God: and it should remind us of our duty towards our fellowmen, especially if we hold any kind of office in the church of Christ."* What a beautiful sentence

Always, the church is in need of strong, patient, compassionate and courageous leadership. This applies whether you are a churchwarden, a parish councillor, a leader of a cell group, a teacher of children, a director of music ministry and of course it

applies to those who are ordained and have been set apart for the ministry of deacon, priest or bishop in the church. There is no way round this... we are expected to give our all, even to the point of suffering and death for the sake of the care of the members of the church. Hopefully, the present situation with the lock down of our church buildings is re-awakening in all of us the great opportunities of ministry which we have to those who are our pastoral responsibility. Hopefully we are learning again, if not for the first time, that the church is not the building, it is the people, the flock for whom Jesus laid down his life and for whom we must do likewise.

Let me conclude by quoting William Barclay once again. He sums up his commentary on Chapter 10 of St John's gospel in this succinct sentence... "*The church's first essential is a leadership based on the example of Christ.*" How true is that!

And now, may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make us complete in everything good so that we may do His will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.