

Easter 4 2009

Acts 4:5-12; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

On Friday I attended with Steve a workshop put on by the Early Intervention Service on Psychosis. This is a body which operates outside the social or Mental Health Services, offering care and observation to young people who may be showing signs of psychosis, at whatever level of seriousness. It was notable that apart from one Social Worker from Camden Social Services, all those attending the workshop were church-based youthworkers, or in the case of Steve and me, a church Pastoral Assistant and a Pastor, or Priest. Those exercising a pastoral role in our society are still often church workers, or in the case of many of the Social Services and of Pastoral Tutors in schools and colleges, they are in roles originally established out of Christian concern for those who fell on the margins of society, for whom other existing services made little provision. To this day, society often shuns the disadvantaged, or those who have any mental health issues, and the church often quite naturally becomes a refuge for them.

In an urban setting like ours, shepherds are not common: the Pastor, or pastoral role holder – whether tutor, councillor or assistant – is perhaps the closest we come to understanding that occupation in human terms. It's perhaps just as well that we hold on to that as a guide to the Gospel we've just heard, because the image of Jesus as Shepherd isn't easy for 21st c. Christians to embrace. Only last Sunday the epistle was celebrating our new dignity as God's *children*. That's all right, we may think, but doesn't Jesus talking of himself as the 'Good Shepherd' risk reducing us to mere senseless sheep?

In the course of this service so far, in liturgy, as well as scripture, we've heard many names applied to Jesus. In the Acts of the Apostles, eg., we heard him described as 'the cornerstone the builders rejected', and simply as 'the name by which we must be saved'. In the passage of John's Gospel just before the one we heard, Jesus has described himself as 'the gate to the sheepfold'. That seems rather confusing, but these two sayings of Jesus in John arise out of the fact that the religious elders have just questioned a man whom Jesus had healed of blindness, and because of his testimony to Jesus' power, have thrown him out of the synagogue. The Hebrew scriptures traditionally held up the standard of the faithful shepherd for those who led God's people – be it priests or rulers. In other words they were expected to show the qualities of God himself, reflected in those words

of the 23rd Psalm we sang before. Jesus, having witnessed this excommunication of an innocent man by the official ‘shepherds’ of his people, pointedly makes these two ‘I am’ statements, that he is both the *gate* of the sheepfold itself, and the *Good Shepherd*.

One of the most celebrated 20th c. commentaries on the Gospel of John was by William Temple, who was Archbishop of Canterbury at the beginning of the 2nd World War until his death in 1944. He draws attention to the actual words used in this Gospel about Jesus as shepherd, which signify him as ‘good’, not in the sense of moral rectitude, but of *attractiveness* – so much so that Temple exaggerates the point by translating the statement as ‘I am the shepherd, the beautiful one.’ He likens this to ‘the beauty of holiness’ that’s often spoken of in the psalms, and in contrast he makes the point that it is all too possible, without this quality, to put others off from the faith we hold:

We must not forget that our vocation is so to practise virtue that men are won to it; it is possible to be morally upright repulsively!

That insight is typical of William Temple’s approach to this passage, which is conscious throughout of the implication of Jesus as the Good Shepherd for *our* calling as his followers. Not for him the passive, mindless cosiness of the sheep-pen: rather the challenge to imitate the inclusive generosity of the Good Shepherd, allowing our personal comfort thresholds to be widened.

Of course the needy will always find refuge in Christ – all of us in our own needy moments - but for those of his fellowship who can, energy has to be spent in taking his welcome from the familiarity of the sheepfold to those ‘other sheep who do not belong to this fold’. The threat of pandemics and ‘valley of the shadow of death’ is as real to children of God and the flock of Christ as to anyone, and we must extend the love and care of the Good Shepherd to all. The first letter of John expresses this pastoral motivation for all followers of Jesus in terms of his ultimate sacrifices: ‘We know love by this, that the Son of God laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another’.

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