



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B

### ***Shepherds should smell of the sheep***

*Readings: Jeremiah 23:1-6, Ps 22, Ephesians 2:13-18, Mark 6:30-3*

I don't think I have heard a homily or a clerical conversation on ministry in the last twelve months that has not quoted Pope Francis' injunction that, 'Shepherds should smell of the sheep'. It's a good line and true to say that most of the good ministers I have known over the last forty years would qualify. I might also add that, in my experience, the sheep don't smell too bad – a little warm and whiffy at worst. I thank God we were not called to herd penguins because they really do stink.

Today's readings lead us back to the imagery of shepherding and it's so familiar that we are endangered of having heard it too often to register its significance.

In Jeremiah it becomes clear that the shepherds of Israel, the whole cultic razzamatazz of the religious hierarchy are liturgically terrific but prophetically deaf and pastorally disastrous. The fall of the kingdom of Judah, that is about to happen, and the period of exile that follows will be one in which God takes over the shepherding himself. The people will come back to a closeness to their Lord and a love of Him in the practice of

their faith in adversity in a strange land and, hundreds of miles from the ruined Temple, will study His Word in groups that will prefigure the synagogue worship of the final exile some five centuries later.

In the Gospel, Jesus and the disciples are trying to get away from the crowds for a time of retreat but it is not possible. We are told simply that Jesus heart goes out to them because they 'are like sheep without a shepherd'. It is in this context that we see the compassion of the One who will identify Himself, in the 'I AM' sayings, as God and take on the promised role of the divine Good Shepherd. It is no accident that this image is among the earliest and most lasting of our pictures of Christ, from the second century frescoes to the Victorian stained glass window. Its importance is rooted in the extraordinary fact that this ministry of the shepherd is handed on to His Church in the person of Peter and in all subsequent Apostolic ministry. So understanding the call of shepherding is critical.

1) The first thing we need to recognise is that it is very different from the English model. There is no dog. The circling menace responding to 'Come by' or 'Away to me' as the shepherd seeks to pen his sheep is not the middle eastern model. The shepherd does not come behind either. He leads.

This is important because there is a model of English ministry that sees the priest chivvy round the edges trying to persuade people that getting into the pen, coming to church, is a jolly good idea. It is the 'no offence' model of ministry. 'Come to church and do God a favour'.

The Leadership model is different. The shepherd sets out confident that he knows where he is going and how to get to good pasture. The sheep have learned to trust his judgement. They follow because they are confident in him.

We are here to give Apologia not apology, to explain the Church's teaching not explain it away. We are not arrogant because of God's revelation but set out knowing it to be true.

2) The shepherd has the task then of leading his sheep to where they may be fed. This is not simply a sacramental task but also an educational one. I am always astonished at how little people have been told or taught and marvel at their faith with so little support. Notice Jesus response to the shepherdless crowd. He teaches them at some length.

We have a duty to instruct. Our homilies are vital but cannot be the sole feeding station nor can that be their primary purpose. Pope Francis, God bless him, has gone to great lengths, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, to encourage priests to put in the preparation time for good homilies but parishes and deaneries need their own education programmes too.

3) The shepherd also has a job of guardianship. The safety of his flock is paramount- their salvation. We would not hesitate to take a man's hand to lead him out of a burning building. We would carry him if he stumbled. Too often our timidity means that we do neither and merely agonise when we get home if we should, perhaps, have written to the Fire Brigade.

There are plenty of dangers out there. The old enemy is 'prowling around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour'.

So the shepherd priest must become well trained in spiritual combat. He must know the wiles of the enemy, recognise them in their many disguises and be prepared to dissuade the Satan from attack or defend against him, fully clothed in the Gospel armour which we mirror in our vesting prayers and which St. Paul spells out for us in Ephesians 6.

4) The shepherd, when the night falls, may well light the fire, proof against the chill of the night air and a deterrent to the creatures of the dark, the predators who would fall on the vulnerable, the straggler, the ones who have allowed themselves to be a little too far off.

The fire of the Spirit is what kept the pursuing hordes of Egypt at bay from the Passover pilgrims three and a half millennia ago. He will still act as guardian against the deprivations of the gathering dark in our own time. So the shepherd must also be the kindler and rekindler and guardian of the Holy Fire. He is to be a man of the Spirit and encourage the activity of God's Holy Spirit among his people, allowing the grace of the sacraments to flow directly into the activity of the Church.

5) Finally the shepherd must be a seeker of the lost. I think it was our current Holy Father who commented that we have, in many areas, one in the pen and 99 lost rather than the other way round but the job remains. We are to seek the lost. They may be broken, damaged, wrecked, ruined or ensnared. They may be indifferent to our concern for them. They may assert that they have no need of the salvation we offer but we should never let them perish, even in their own reckless stupidity, for want of our seeking them out.

There are many other tasks for the shepherd but leading, feeding, defending, seeking and keeping the fire burning will do to be going on with.

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