



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

4th Sunday of Easter Year B

I am the good shepherd

Readings: Acts 4: 8-12, Ps 117, 1 John 3: 1-2, John 10: 11-18

The transition of ancient man from nomadic herdsman to settled arable farmer and herd enclosure was a long and gradual process. In some remote areas it is still going on. (Those of you who watched the brief but delightful series with Kate Humble from the personalised old style shepherding of the Andean highlands to the industrial scale of Australian sheep farming will know what I mean).

For all this millennia long transformation the image of the shepherd remains powerful in a culture where one is rarely seen. We generally rehearse our shepherd knowledge at Christmas. We remember they are poor, pretty far down the social ladder and, for the most part, leading a lonely, unconsidered and often vulnerable life on the margins. On them, nonetheless, does the life and sustenance of the community depend. For all its lowliness and obscurity the vocation of the shepherd occupies a central place in the iconography of the Faith. When Jesus pronounces the great line, *'I am the Good Shepherd'*, He is, in fact, making several

astonishing claims in language that, until very recently, would resonate universally.

For those eagerly expecting Messianic intervention, here is a direct reference to the great shepherd King of Israel, David – the youngest and unconsidered son called home from the sheepfolds to be anointed as the leader of God's people and the fountainhead of the Messianic line. Jesus is in direct line of descent. The King of Kings is the King in waiting here.

Second we hear the echo of the great self-revelation of God that echoes like a drumbeat through St. John's Gospel in the 'I AM' sayings. Jesus takes the divine name, revealed to Moses at the Burning Bush in Exodus 3, - the I AM WHO I AM – and applies it to Himself , thereby claiming Godhead in addition to human kingship. This great title applies throughout John's Gospel – I AM, the vine, the way, the door, the light of the world etc. At its most shocking we hear it in the Garden of Gethsemane where, in reply to the police enquiries, Jesus replies 'I AM HE' and, in awe, they fall to the ground. God revealed.

Here God, in Christ reveals Himself, not for the first time as the Shepherd of Israel. It is a title that He has borne before in the prophets. It is, in this role, that God translates Himself to Man's understanding. It will be this role that He hands on to the Apostolic office of His Church when He appoints, on the Resurrection shoreline, Peter as Pastor Pastorum and Pastor Gregis.

It therefore outlines very clearly the role and charism of the sacred ministry for the shepherds must imitate the Lord. The shepherd is responsible for several things.

First and foremost he is responsible for the safety of the flock – for their salvation. This he is to defend with his life.

Second he is responsible for their pasturing, their feeding. He must be someone who can lead them to the good things of God. This is often an educational task – the latin origin of the word educere – to lead out from (darkness to light). By this teaching ministry the flock are fed and strengthened. He is responsible for seeking the strayed. Separated from the flock, they become vulnerable, prey to the wolves of wickedness. He is charged with bringing them safely home – Heaven always in his view.

In all this he has a task of governance....

In a supposedly anti-authoritarian culture, the use and abuse of authority is closely monitored and often rejected. Nonetheless the shepherd has to exercise governance. In the eastern model, familiar to Jesus, he leads from the front. He needs no dogs to snap at the heels of his wards. He trusts them to follow. They trust him because they know he leads in their interests and in their service. They have learned to trust. Different pastors exercise different styles of authority but they are all based on that supreme title of Peter and his successors – the Servant of the servants of God.

The pastor who simply stands in the midst of his flock and prepares to follow the most wayward sheep is a bad servant and the flock are duly put at risk. He is there for a reason. His knowledge, courage, care and self-sacrifice are at the heart of the matter if he is intend to mirror the image of his beloved Master, the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ Our Lord. Pope Francis tells us, as pastors, 'to smell of the sheep'.

He does not tell us to be woolly.

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