



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year B- 2018 Padstow

Near Restful Waters He Leads Me

Readings: Jeremiah 23: 1-6, Psalm 23, Ephesians 2:13-18, Mark 6: 30-34

If a corpse could hear then practically the last thing that would rattle across the coffin, as it begins its journey to the earth or trundles through the curtains into the Cremulator, would be the Twenty Third Psalm. Its familiarity, enhanced by the skirl of Crimond, has become almost a cliché of the English way of death.

Although it is important for mourners to be comforted there is always a risk that this overworked image of shepherding may descend into the sludge of sentimentality and emotional anaesthesia. That was certainly not the Psalmist's intention, nor the intention of Jesus Himself when He applies the image supremely to His own person and ministry.

Today's Gospel is not the classic text but a passing and powerful reminder of Christ's work among us. The prophet Jeremiah records the Lord as condemning the useless shepherding of priests and rulers and that He will reclaim that role for Himself. In Jesus that is exactly what He does and we get a hint of that at the very end of today's Gospel. The crowds are scurrying headlong hither and thither and, frankly, Jesus and His disciples need a rest from them. But they are 'like sheep without a shepherd' and Jesus takes pity on them and teaches them at length.

In shepherding them Himself Jesus is taking up the sacred role of His human ancestor, the shepherd king of Israel, David. In shepherding them Himself Jesus is taking up the divine role prophesied today by Jeremiah. The shepherd, in spiritual terms, is not some fluffy rustic herdsman of popular imagination. The shepherd is the Leader – Eastern shepherds lead their flock not follow. The shepherd is the sustainer – he ensures the feeding, the of his flock. The shepherd is the defender against all

harm and the predators of the wild. The shepherd is the searcher for any who have become detached from the flock

and therefore hugely more vulnerable. The shepherd is the guardian of the holy fire against the servants of the dark.

This is a tall order for any leader, spiritual or secular. It is not achievable without God.

Most people who read today's Gospel will probably miss its historic resonance. When the Gospeller uses the phrase, 'they were like sheep without a shepherd', the Jewish reader's mind will go back across the centuries to just this phrase being used in a prophecy almost nine hundred years before.

The time is the reign of Ahab (of Jezebel fame), the apostatising king, the promoter of paganism, the sacrificer of children, the stealer of lands, the conspirator in judicial murder, the mortal enemy of the great prophet Elijah.

Ahab's latest wheeze is to ally with Judah to regain the lost city of Ramoth Gilead. The King of Judah is keen to consult the court prophets as to whether this is God's will. They all say 'Yes'. The Judaeen king is uneasy. What does his old enemy, the prophet Micaiah, say? Amazingly Micaiah says 'Yes'. The Judaeen king is not convinced. He asks Micaiah what God really says. Micaiah replies that he sees all Israel 'scattered upon the mountains like sheep without a shepherd' – the king of Israel, Ahab, dead.

Ahab arrests and imprisons Micaiah, the battle goes ahead. To avoid the prophecy Ahab disguises himself as an ordinary charioteer – not the king. Hit by a random arrow and mortally wounded he limps home to bleed to death by the pool of Samaria – just as Elijah had prophesied. All Israel is scattered on the mountains 'like sheep without a shepherd'. The people are without leader or defender. It is a time of crisis.

This simple phrase, with its massive historical resonance does not appear by accident in the Gospel. The country, in Jesus' time, was occupied by a pagan power. The government was collaborationist. The religious authorities were insular, obsessed with their own issues and unable to fulfil the historic vocation of God's people. In the midst of all this the people are leaderless, aimless, lost and vulnerable. Exhausted though He is Jesus is moved, by compassion, to teach them.

In a time of national apostasy and failed leadership the task of the Church remains unchanging. It is to be the Body of Christ on earth. It is to be Jesus. It is to be the Good Shepherd to a scattered and confused people. It is to teach the Faith without dilution or accommodation. It is to speak the truth – whatever the cost. It is to have compassion – the Greek word means ‘to be moved to the very depth of one’s being’- for the salvation of the lost. And this is the key to the very heart of God’s love for Man in Jesus - and the very engine of all our Gospel mission.

Corpus Christi-The Body and Blood of Christ Year B

We kneel before the beauty of the Grail

*Readings: Exodus 24: 3-8, Psalm 115, Hebrews 9: 11-15, Mark 14: 12-16
22-26*

 2018 Fowey Retreat