



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

4th Sunday of Easter-Year B-April 25th 2021

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

‘I will never violate my covenant nor go back on the word I have spoken. Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness. I will never lie to David. His dynasty shall last for ever. In my sight his throne is like the sun; like the moon, it shall endure for ever.’ PSALM 88 (89).

It is difficult for us to imagine, urbanite and suburbanites mainly, the significance of the imagery of today’s Gospel. Even those of us who dwell in the bucolic beauty of God’s own country, Cornwall, are unfamiliar with way of life which informs Jesus’ teaching and personal claims in today’s Gospel.

When Jesus uses the divine name – I AM - and attaches it to the image of the pastor, the shepherd, He is consciously invoking and fulfilling the long cherished dream of His people, Israel.

When the surrounding followers hear the claim of Shepherding, a host of historical references, prophecies and promises will begin to resonate in their hearts and minds.

THIS IS NOT ABOUT A NICE MAN CUDDLING A FLUFFY SHEEP.

For the contemporary Israelite this is a harking back to the all too brief years of the greatest moment in their history – the Davidic Kingdom –

and its longed for return. (It is the Jewish equivalent of the Arthurian legend, the Once and Future King who will return.)

The importance of David should never be underestimated in the progress of the Gospel. You only have to look at the New Testament sermons in Acts to notice how often the preacher reminds his listeners that Jesus' credentials are underpinned by His royal bloodline.

Two Gospels go to enormous trouble to do just that with extensive genealogies.

What is going on here?

King David emerges from obscurity, the unconsidered (even by his own family) shepherd boy, discerned and anointed by the prophet Samuel, to become the second king of Israel. He is to replace the stuttering, failing, monarchy of Saul. He will become the leader of the tribes. He will turn them from a wandering, struggling to settle, persecuted by the historic enemies of Philistia and Amalek, into a settled people with a territorial integrity and a capital city that will outlast everything, Jerusalem – the image to which, in the three millennia following, every exiled Jew will turn in longing ('Next year in Jerusalem') and Christians will revere as the earthly image of the Heavenly Kingdom.

David marks the transition from the pastoral community, the wandering herdsman model, to the arable mix and the burgeoning townships and settled communities. He is the high watermark of military success. He is the great sign of an united nation which, under his promising but flawed son Solomon, will begin to unravel under the influence of paganism, and under his idiotic grandson, disintegrate in rebellion and later defeat and exile. The reign of David is the eternal hope of Israel.

David begins his life as a shepherd. It is no accident, therefore, that this task becomes a key theme of Old Testament understanding of the type of leadership and the historic destiny of God's chosen people and, not

incidentally, the very nature of the God who brought them out of Egypt, gave the Law, settled in the long ago Promised Land and anointed the Shepherd King.

In both the Psalms and the Prophets, leadership is equated with shepherding. Indeed the very nature of God's ministry to His people is seen as Pastoral. When human shepherds fail, the divine shepherd steps in, Ezekiel tells us.

So, here is Jesus, claiming to be the Good Shepherd. He is, at once, reminding the people of His historic claim to the throne of Israel, the true heir of David's lost line, the restorer of the kingdom. You can begin to see why this might have troubled the authorities in Jerusalem.

He is also aligning Himself with the expressed pastoral vocation of God to His neglected and wandering flock.

GOD - I AM - is coming to defeat the enemy, the giants, the Goliaths of dominating paganism, to reclaim the City of Peace for His people and to care for them in a way that has all the hallmarks of divine concern. The new David is not just a direct descendant of the royal line of Bethlehem, but the manifestation of that kingship upon which human kingship depends and from which it draws its meaning - that is the sovereignty of God. (It is no accident that the recorded witnesses to the birth of the new David are first shepherds and then, by tradition, kings).

The new and ancient and eternal Shepherd King will offer His life in the battle with marauding evil.

The Eastern Shepherd leads His flock from the front. He knows where He is going. Where He goes the sheep know there will be pasture.

If they stay close to Him there will be safety, salvation.

When the enemy is at hand, the pagan predator, they know that He will defend them to the death.

The Good Shepherd will walk in the wild places to rescue the lost sheep.

All Christian shepherding, pastoring, priesthood draws its life and example and meaning from this fundamental charism of Christ, Pastor Pastorum, Shepherd of the Shepherds of God.

When Jesus declares, 'I AM the GOOD SHEPHERD', He is claiming the fulfilment of both the divine and historic Kingship in Himself.

Jesus Christ is the once and future King, the eternal sovereign whose reign endures forever and in whom alone we can, at the last, enter the City of Peace, Jerusalem.