



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

4th Sunday of Easter Year B

A true shepherd

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

When I was thinking about this Sunday's readings, a few weeks ago, there was an item on the radio about a new form of shepherding – herding sheep by drone, one of those flying camera jobs which you can now send aloft and take pictures of your neighbour sunbathing amongst other things. It is called a 'shepcopter'. It buzzes around the sheep and marshals them into a pen. I put this in because I know you rely on my homilies for keeping at the 'cutting edge' of technology and social change.

It is a rather different image of shepherding from the one we are used to. And shepherding is vital to our understanding of Faith and ministry. Perhaps the earliest image we have, in devotional art from the Roman frescoes, of Christ Jesus Our Lord is that of the Good Shepherd. In that picture the youthful Christ bears the rescued lost sheep around His shoulders, gazing out from a scene of pastoral idyll.

The Good Shepherd remains, two millennia later, the most popular and most powerful image of Christ's earthly ministry and His continuing

ministry through His apostolic delegates in the ordained ministry ever since. It is no accident that this ancient and, in modern societies, redundant calling still resonates within the heart of the community of Faith.

For most of us, our image of the Shepherd derives from the saccharine sentimentality of Victorian stained glass windows or, if we are old enough, from the hugely successful TV series, 'One Man and His Dog'.

Neither quite delivers. Whatever else shepherds are, they are not cosy or sentimental. The life is lonely, grubby, all weather and hard. Nor do Eastern shepherds have much use for a dog. Endless calls of 'Come bye' and 'Away to me' leave us with the image of a circling collie, cajoling, corralling, manoeuvring, brainless creatures in the required direction.

This is not an altogether helpful picture of the Pastor's relationship to his flock, though sadly not entirely misplaced sometimes.

The Eastern Shepherd leads his sheep. They have learnt that where he goes it is best to follow. They have experienced the reality that keeping his company leads to good pasture. They have come to know that his presence will deter the enemy. They recognise his voice and he knows them. They understand that when they are safe in the fold, he will be the gate. They are grateful that if they are foolish enough to stray or get themselves lost, he will seek them out and rescue them.

In the history of the Faith there is no image that better exemplifies the true pastor.

It is no accident that the Church singles out this day as Vocations Sunday. She is calling upon God to raise up men who will come to fit this exacting bill and who, for all their humility and feelings of inadequacy nonetheless feel called to this extraordinary ministry.

The shepherd/parish priest is called to exemplify Jesus with his people. He could not be further removed from the 'shepcopter', the impersonal, irritating, chivvying, uncaring, utilitarian dog substitute, always droning on and snapping at the heels of the unfortunate sheep in his 'care'.

The true shepherd/priest is called to do the work of God for, as God reminds us in Ezekiel, He is the true shepherd of His people. We human shepherds represent Him so we need to increasingly resemble Him and that means being more and more like Jesus.

The true shepherd has clear duties and responsibilities. He is called to lead. He is called to feed the flock with sound teaching. He is called to defend them from prowling wickedness with the staff of God's Word and the fire of the Holy Spirit. He is to seek the lost, the confused, the disorientated and bring them home. He is to watch over his people's going out and coming in. He stands at the gate of salvation and ushers his flock in. He is utterly committed to His people to the point of sacrifice. And he celebrates the sacrifice on which his is based every day of his ministerial life.

They are to know his voice because it is one of authority AND encouragement. It is a voice they trust because it is loving and merciful. It is a voice on which they rely because it always tells the truth.

These are big 'asks' and not to be achieved in a man's own strength.
A true shepherd will only fulfil his calling if he sticks close to and depends entirely on The Good Shepherd, Christ Jesus Himself.

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