

The Good Shepherd

Easter 4

Our youngest son, George, became a vegan three years ago. As my wife put the leg of lamb in the oven on Easter Sunday he explained that just as racism and sexism were now considered generally unacceptable, he regarded 'speciesism' in exactly the same way. He was convinced that we should treat animals no differently from humans.

George would undoubtedly have seen through the sentimentality of the image of the 'Good Shepherd'. The sentimentality is as false as the fair haired and blue eyed Jesus. The truth is that any shepherd with an ounce of common sense knows that sheep are a commodity, they are his living and it would not require any EU health and safety directive to persuade him not to die for the sheep. You do not give your life for a commodity.

But the first hearers of Jesus' words would immediately have picked up on an association that would be less obvious to us. The image of the Good Shepherd is taken from the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel who proclaimed that the Lord God would take the sheep from the care of the shepherds and care for them himself. Shepherds in this context are the political and religious leaders and Ezekiel's prophecy is a condemnation of all those leaders who have exploited their own people. The Good Shepherd, in contrast, is the Lord God himself ruling his people.

And Jesus has the audacity to claim that he is the Good Shepherd. He is claiming to be God himself. It is little wonder that they crucified him.

And of course his followers continued to proclaim his uniqueness. In our first reading, from Acts, we hear how Peter is challenged about healing a sick man. He replies,

This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.'

Acts 4:11-12

Like Jesus himself, Peter insists on the centrality of Jesus to salvation. And again like Jesus himself, Peter does it with reference to what we know as the Old Testament and Peter and Jesus would simply have known as the scriptures. For 'the stone that was rejected by the builders' is a quotation from Psalm 118. Peter is making the point that Jesus is not inventing some new fangled religion. The Christian faith grows out of the Jewish faith. Jesus is the one that the Jewish scriptures foretold. It is little wonder that Peter, too, paid with his life.

But let us go back to that symbol of the Good Shepherd. Let us unpick that a little more. Looking back to Ezekiel makes it clear that it is a political symbol. It is a symbol of the nature of leadership. It is a symbol of political priorities.

Let us take first the symbolism of leadership. It is there is the second line of today's gospel

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

John 10:11

Taken literally it is absurd: You do not give your life for a commodity. But if we substitute 'King' for 'Shepherd', as would have been quite natural to the Jews of Jesus' time, then we can see that Jesus is saying something quite radical about the nature of leadership. When the people of Israel had first demanded a King, the prophet Samuel had warned them that a king would exploit them economically and militarily. Ezekiel had promised that God would uphold judgment against such kings and for the people; Jesus goes even further and promises that in his role as King he will die for his people.

Ezekiel did not foresee that. But his contemporary prophet, Isaiah did and Christians were quick to see that he had foretold Jesus' example of leadership:

Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows!
He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him.

Isaiah 53: 4-5

If you have ever sung the chorus of Handel's' Messiah you will have sung those words. Perhaps they are words that should be sung by Theresa May, Jeremy Corbyn and all the rest to remind them of the true nature of leadership.

But perhaps our political leaders might also want to read the precise grounds on which Ezekiel condemned the rulers of Israel:

You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost

Ezekiel 34:4

Perhaps that might be the basis for a Christian General Election manifesto:

- strengthen the weak
- heal the sick
- bind up the injured,
- bring back the strayed
- seek the lost

The First letter of S John that we heard a few minutes ago makes a similar point. He takes the model of leadership set out by Jesus but applies it to all his followers:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

1 John 3:16-17

It is not just the political world that is turned upside down by the Good Shepherd: it is the whole of life. WE may have challenging words for our political master but Jesus applies the same words to each one of us.

N Clews

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St James the Great, Woodhall And Waterloo