



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for Easter IV (26th April) 2026

New Testament scholars often infer from the content and tone of the literature ascribed to Saint John - the Gospel and the three Catholic Epistles, which bear his name - that they emerged from a Christian community that was fractious with the author or authors struggling to hold the line in acrimonious disputes about the Faith. The juxtaposition of the Good Shepherd and the thief in this morning's Gospel reading is, perhaps, an instance of this.

That there was at times in Christian communities some level of disagreement should not come as a surprise. The life of the first generations of the earthly Church were characterised by the need to make sense of the Christ phenomenon - both the events that we have just celebrated at Easter and also the experience of the continuing Presence of the risen Christ in their midst. A couple of books have been published in recent years detailing the smorgasbord of Christian and quasi-Christian perspectives, which swirled around the life of the sub-Apostolic Church.

Some of these are mischievous, seeking to undermine the Christianity of today by suggesting that what we might term Catholic Christianity developed by mere serendipity and it could easily all have looked so different: the implication being that Faith as believed and practised today is a random outcome of philosophical evolution. Others simply draw our attention to the fact of this constellation of ideas, often describing how we got where we are.

The Church would supplement this latter approach with the contention that progress was made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which sees the process of sorting and selecting - theology as we would call it - as the continuation of the phase of Revelation of Faith inaugurated by the incarnate Ministry of Christ: and a task of discernment, which is a continuing feature of the Church's task.

However, for all the progress that has been made, we should not suppose that the thieves and brigands have melted away. Indeed, in every generation, there have been and are those who would steal away the sheep of the ecclesiastical flock for their own purposes.

The thieves and brigands are, in fact, a multi-faceted phenomenon, which would require quite a long sermon to describe even in outline; so we shall follow just one strand this morning.

To understand this aspect of noxious interest in the Church, we need to remember that we have, for many centuries, been an institution rich in human and organisational terms, the support or acquiescence of which can or could be of great value to a range of worldly interests.

In all generations, the Church - or parts of her - encounter the thieves and brigands, who, through pressure or the promise of earthly reward seek to secure our support for or acquiescence in their projects and philosophies.

The Gospel warns us, however, that these trends will destroy us; and this is because they will take us away from the Truth and the mission that is integral to the life of the Church and Christian discipleship; they will invest us with a character, which is antithetical to the identity and Purpose for which we are called by God.

Part of our challenge, as market place of ideas bustles around us, is to learn to recognise and hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and follow Him, ignoring the siren voices trying to lure us down other paths.