



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

Homily for Easter IV (21st April) 2024

When Jesus described Himself as the Good Shepherd, He was drawing on a metaphor, which had a long tradition in Judaism; and one which had been developed to understand the relationship between God and His Chosen People.

This theological inquiry went hand in hand with the emerging sense of the Covenant between God and the Jews: that there are duties and responsibilities owed both by the people to God, but also by God to the People.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus speaks of the shepherd's duty to protect the sheep; but there is more to it than simply responding to danger. The shepherd is responsible for the general welfare of the sheep - ensuring that they have sufficient to eat, that they find shelter when the weather is grim - even keeping their coats in trim so that they do not become a burden. Sheep farmers will tell you of the long sleepless nights during the lambing season as they try to ensure that difficult births are brought to a successful conclusion.

To a large extent, a shepherd has to work with the flock as it is. There may be a bit of buying and selling of sheep; but generally, a flock is a fairly stable community and too much churn actually weakens one of the great assets of sheep - their innate inclination to invest in the safety and security of the flock.

The degree to which the shepherd is "in charge" is severely constrained by the nature of the task and the beasts for which she or he cares: to a large extent it is the task of the shepherd, rather than the shepherd her or himself, which determines the choices, which have to be made and how they are made.

All of this has relevance for Christians, since we have assimilated the metaphor of the shepherd and sheep into our understanding of the nature of leadership within the life of the Church. A bishop carries a stylised shepherd's crook as part of the Episcopal insignia, and we often speak in terms of the pastoral role of clergy.

Although in Church of England circles, we often speak of a priest as being pastoral to describe one who is good with people in the moments of their personal crises, in fact, the term actually refers to the whole gamut of activities in which the priest or bishop engages. Even when engaged in the inevitable instances of management, the cleric or others with positions of leadership must operate within that framework and context of the Covenant of responsibilities, which are laid on the shepherd towards the sheep.

This does not mean that sometimes difficult decisions do not have to be made; but those hard choices are also governed by the needs of the welfare of the flock rather than the personal preferences of the shepherd. More broadly, as I have observed over the years, freedom of action for ecclesiastical leaders is quite rare: often one's role is merely to articulate the option, which has to be selected - for one reason or another.

Of course, over time, the flock will come to reflect something of the shepherd's vision for how things should be; but equally, that vision will significantly be determined by the flock as it is rather than how the shepherd with a free hand might wish it to be.

Ultimately, as Jesus suggests in the Gospel, the shepherd's role is to protect the integrity and welfare of the flock; and it is only when the shepherd embraces that duty that the flock will flourish and be able to fulfil the purposes for which it is maintained.