



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

### Homily for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (21<sup>st</sup> July) 2024

When we reflect on Jesus, the Shepherd, we usually think in terms of function. Our imagining is overly influenced by those schmaltzy Victorian images of a kindly and gentle Christ cuddling a remarkably well-fed looking lamb. We frequently reduce the notion of the pastoral to this rather dewy-eyed portrayal of care and empathy.

As I observed a few weeks or so ago, the concept of the pastoral extends much more widely, embracing the Liturgical and acts of governance along with the fulfilment of Christ's prescription of mutual concern and care. These are undertaken as we become in the world agents of Jesus the Shepherd.

However, even this does not really get to the heart of the proclamation of Jesus, the Shepherd, which is not primarily a job-description, but an assertion of His fundamental identity.

To comprehend the full significance of the designation, we might refer ourselves to what the opening words of what is probably the best known of the psalms: the twenty-third, which starts with the assertion that, "The Lord is my Shepherd." The Lord, here, of course, is God Himself and what we might term the *shepherdship* of the world ultimately belongs to Him.

When, therefore, in Saint John's Gospel, Jesus describes Himself as the Good Shepherd, He is making reference to His divine identity. Of course, His identity is inseparable from His role; and so, in Christ, we have a revelation of the nature of God and His dealings with the world He has made and the people who live in it.

As I mentioned a moment ago, to a large extent, God undertakes His role of Shepherd through the agency of human beings, who are called to care, to govern and lead prayer. In the provisions of the Renewed Covenant, as with Christ's priesthood, the *shepherdship* inheres primarily in the whole Church; and, as also with the priesthood, aspects of the work are assigned to different people.

As we learn from this morning's reading from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, those who are called to exercise these various elements of the divine Shepherd on His behalf, can fail in their task to the detriment of the People of God.

It is possible that Jesus had Jeremiah's admonition in mind when, as we heard at the end of the Gospel reading, He saw the people like sheep without a shepherd. In this, He is saying more than simply that they are directionless or lacking in care: the import of His words is that they are people without God. We can infer this from the fact that He does not then feed them or care for their needs, but sets Himself to teach them at some length. In other words, He instructs them in what it is to be people with God.

It is in recognising Christ's true identity that we, the sheep, are able to share in His work as Shepherd, since it is only then that we shall understand what it is that we are called to do. The role of shepherd within the life of the Church is not ultimately ours, but something we hold in trust from the true Shepherd. The various strands of its role are all to be directed towards that single aim of fashioning the flock into a people who are no longer like sheep without a shepherd - people without God: the flock being both ourselves in our frailty and partial embrace of the Christian life and also the people around us.