

The Old Testament reading on Sundays is almost always connected thematically with the gospel. Today that theme is the shepherd and the flock. Specifically, both passages emphasise the need for good shepherds who will take care of their sheep. The first reading from Jeremiah castigates those shepherds who had allowed the flock of Israel to be 'destroyed and scattered'; and in this case, 'shepherd' means not only religious leaders, but also kings, governors and civil authorities – anyone, in fact, who had responsibility for the wellbeing of God's people. We should remember that Jeremiah wrote this at the time of the Jews' exile in Babylon – so the flock was quite literally destroyed and scattered. The two readings, put side by side, describe the archetypal bad shepherd and the eternal good shepherd, who is Christ our Lord

Images of a shepherd and his flock can be found throughout scripture. Sheep are mentioned more than five hundred times in the Bible, more than any other animal. This prominence grew out of two basic experiences: first, that sheep were extremely important to the agricultural and economic life of nomadic tribes like the Hebrews and, second, that they are an ideal metaphor, a perfect image, of God's people. The ways in which these animals serve to illustrate, describe, reflect and teach in so many biblical narratives is highly significant and, at times, their presence is almost mystical:

The very first shepherd was Abel, who was killed by his brother Cain...

Abraham offered a ram instead of his son as a burnt offering on Moria...

An unblemished lamb was killed, cooked and eaten on the night of the first Passover and its blood smeared on the lintels of the Hebrews' houses to protect them from the Angel of Death...

King David traditionally wrote one of the most beautiful of all the psalms, 23, 'The Lord is My Shepherd'...

And there are the beautiful verses from Isaiah, set to music with melodic elegance by Handel: "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd; he shall gather the lambs in his arms and carry them close to his heart; he gently leads those that are with young." (40:10-11)...

In the prophet Ezekiel we read: “You are my flock, the sheep of my pasture. You are my people and I am your God.” (34:31)...

All this abundance of imagery, this metaphorical richness, finds its completion and fullness, in – to paraphrase St Paul – ‘the breadth and length and height and depth’ of the love of Christ Jesus. This is because he brings everything together in himself when he says: “I am the Good Shepherd’, ‘I know my sheep and my own know me’, and ‘My sheep listen to my voice and they follow me.’ It is well known that animals can instantly recognise the voice of a familiar or trusted person. That voice is never intrusive, never critical or negative or commanding; those strident voices in our head that constantly tell us we must do this or that, or we’re not as good as everyone else, or we’re a hypocrite and if only other people knew us as we really are, or we’ll never be a nicer person no matter how hard we try, and what’s the point anyway – all these obsessive carpings are not the voice of the good shepherd, who in any case speaks first and foremost to our hearts, not our head.

Sheep also have an excellent memory for faces as well as voices and, like domestic pets, they can read and understand facial expressions. The relationship between sheep and shepherd can be very close. The sheep trust the shepherd, for his image is reflected in their watchful eyes, just as the image of the one Living God is reflected in the dusty mirror of our soul. It is a mutual beholding and recognition.

Yet Christ is not only the Shepherd, he also the Lamb. He is the lamb of sacrifice who takes away the sins of the world. As the prophet Isaiah says:

“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” (53.7).

We remind ourselves of this at every Mass, when we pray: ‘Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.’ For the Mass itself is a sacramental lifting of the veil between time and eternity, revealing that transcendental realm where the Calvary sacrifice is never *not* happening.

Most of the references Jesus makes to the image of a shepherd and his sheep are to be found in the gospel of John and they are plentiful. For example:

“(But) you don’t believe me because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me” (10:26-28)...

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Just as my Father knows me and I know the Father, so I sacrifice my life for the sheep.” (10:10-15)...

“Jesus repeated the question: ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ Peter said, ‘you know I love you.’ ‘Take care of my sheep,’ Jesus said. Then a third time he asked him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, ‘Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my sheep.’” (21:16-17)...

In the gospel of Luke we have the parable of the Lost Sheep, which illustrates the great love that impels the Good Shepherd to seek out and save those animals that have strayed from the flock; Matthew gives us the parable of the sheep and the goats; and in Mark, Jesus feels pity for the crowds because they were like ‘sheep without a shepherd.’ (6:34) – one of only two references to sheep in this gospel.

What to do with all this? We do what Mary did: store it up in our hearts. There is nothing to ‘think about’, no conclusions to be drawn, nothing to make sense of, no principles to be understood – all that is the work of the head, not the heart. It is like listening to music or reading poetry – it must be experienced, not analysed. When we hold all these marvellous images of sheep and shepherd and within us, simply let them *be*, without commentary or question, their meaning will take root, grow and blossom. And that meaning will be *ours*: it will not come from Church doctrine or canon law, it won’t be given to us by priests or bishops; it will be spoken by the

voice of the Good Shepherd within us, in our heart... and we will recognise it at once.

And what will this do for us in our everyday lives? Here I would like to share the words of a contemporary pastor, specially written for these times:

“We are living in a fear epidemic, stoked in part by a ceaseless media onslaught that makes tragedies from around the world part of our everyday experience, and has a global pandemic crouching at our door. We live in a time of great uncertainty, when important things that we once thought we could rely upon have been taken away from us. Perhaps not since the Second World War has a generation been exposed to such apprehension and fear. The causes may be different, but the effects can be the same. In such a time as this, if you want to live your life free from anxiety then remind yourself, every day, that your Shepherd is with you, every step of the way. Trust in him, for he is with you always and, in all circumstances, even the most frightening, he will carry you with tender love in his arms, close to his heart.”

This tender love can be seen most movingly in the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter. I prefer the version given by Mark, which, unusually, is the longest, providing details whose authenticity leaps out from the page; he interrupts his narrative with the account of the woman with a haemorrhage – also utterly convincing in its emotional tone. We should note the often-missed numerical connection between the two stories: the woman had been suffering from her condition for twelve years – which was exactly the age of Jairus' daughter. This is not a coincidence. When Jesus takes her by the hand, he says in Aramaic (the language most commonly spoken in his time) *Talitha, kum*; this is usually translated as 'little girl, get up' – but there is more to it than that. 'Talitha' is actually a diminutive, an affectionate term of endearment as well as a given name; its root is *taleh*, which is very closely related to *talal*, often used to mean the diminutive of sheep – that is, a lamb. So Jesus is almost certainly saying to the girl: 'Little lamb, I tell you, get up.'

What a difference this makes; because of it, we are able to hear the authentic voice of the Good Shepherd.