



FOURTH SUNDAY EASTER 2006

Acts 4:8-12. 1 John 3: 1-2 John 10: 11-18

The first part of Chapter Ten of St. John's Gospel is a meditation on the disciple's role of shepherding. Although the people of Israel had been settled for centuries they carried a lot of nostalgia for the good old days when they were pastoralists, wandering the land with their flocks.

Today's reading reflects on the good shepherd. The good shepherd is easily distinguished from other shepherds, he or she is the one who is prepared to die for the sheep. This may appear a little extreme as an image but it is not so hard to understand when we consider the lengths we go to in this country for pets.

Here farmers go out in extreme weather to protect their flocks. They are certainly concerned about the protection of their livelihood but most farmers are also concerned to deal humanely with their animals.

The difference between the shepherd and the hired hand is commitment. At the first sign of trouble the flock is abandoned by the uncommitted. In the time of the writer there was a lot of trouble in the world and in their communities and probably a lot of running away, either literally or through denial.

Today we can discern a number of troubles that beset the church. We may be tempted to run away or look somewhere other than our own communities for answers. Vatican 2 made it clear that the church could not be made to fit any one image of our devising. It also emphasised that the church was the people of God, a sign of God's gathering of all humankind into God's love. It was only after stating these truths that the council turned to the question of structure.

It is self-evident that any group needs some structures if it is not to lose itself in unfocussed activity or worse lose sight of its goals. Structures are to serve the mission of the church. Leadership and the way it is exercised is an important part of the health of the enterprise.

All adult disciples take part in the leadership of the church. Certain members elect the Pope on behalf of the whole community. At present not all members of the church are involved in determining named leaders but it does not excuse us from the exercise of leadership in other ways.

We are all called to exercise our leadership in education, in parish affairs, in service of the poor and in community worship. Most of us work in one or other area and we need to be informed on matters concerning that area.

Formation as adult Christians includes knowing our history so that we can judge new movements in the light of the tradition. We are not keepers of a museum but holders of a living tradition so we must be looking forward to discern ways that the Christian story can serve the world.

In the face of much despair, we must remain a sign of God's all-encompassing love, even in the face of the narrowmindedness of members of our own communities.

In our local churches we need to be looking for ways that the three-fold role of the Good Shepherd can be exercised well.

Priest: in the development of good worship and sound prayer.

Prophet: in the challenge to the community itself to strive to follow Christ more closely.

King: in the concern for and care for members of our own community.

Remember it was last aspect of Christian living that so impressed non-Christians in the early centuries.

Our dominant image of sheep as a vast woolly carpet moving over the hills or along a dusty road, can have the effect of making us forget that, while as members we are willingly to accept the ministry of leadership from others, it is a conscious action based on the recognition that leadership is a gift for the community and that when we lead we do so, willingly to die for the group.

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