

4th Sunday of Eastertide (A)

7th May 2017

'Called to be a Shepherd'

Acts 2: 3000 added to their number. Ps 22: He guides me along the right path ...
1Pt 2: you had gone astray like sheep, but now ... come back to the shepherd ...
Jn 10: anyone who enters through me will be safe: he will go freely in and out ...

On Thursday some of us are going to go on a day's pilgrimage to Aylesford, to the shrine of Our Lady of Mount Carmel & St Simon Stock, the Carmelite friary in Kent. It's a tranquil spot, nestling by the River Medway, and a perfect place for a quiet day of prayer. But, for me, it also has a further meaning, because in many ways I see it as the home of my vocation as a priest. When I was little, we lived very near there, perhaps just 2 miles away. And one of the things we did on a Sunday afternoon — if we didn't go out walking in the hills — was to go to Aylesford, to the shrine. Come rain or shine, we would often go to Aylesford ... sometimes it was bustling with pilgrims, sometimes we had the place almost to ourselves ... but always, as a young family, it was a special place to go for my parents, my sister and brother, and me. And of all the lovely parts of the precincts of the Friars, the place that for many visitors is the heart of the shrine is the Cloister chapel, a small chapel,

solid stone walls, deeply tranquil, and with that truly nostalgic smell of the oil of the burning candles: it always felt a truly holy place. Somewhere, somehow, deep in the place in one's heart where only the Spirit works, this place — I am convinced — helped me to come to know that I wanted to be a priest. By the time we left Kent, when I was ten, I already knew that I should be a priest. Despite the 17 years that separated that time from the day I entered seminary, I never knew any other real calling than that of wanting to be a priest.

We celebrate today the Mass of the 4th Sunday of Eastertide, which is always kept as 'Good Shepherd Sunday,' and as Vocations Sunday. The image of the Good Shepherd is always a powerful one, and endearing one, isn't it? For the Jewish people, close to the land and to farming and to the rearing of animals, the image had a direct appeal ... At times in the past, Moses and King David had also been shepherds. And the most famous of all the psalms of Israel is the one which invokes "The Lord is my Shepherd." Christian saints, too, have been shepherds! — think of St

Patrick, or of St Bernadette! No wonder Jesus used the image of Himself. And if the Son of God wanted to be seen as a tender and loving shepherd, by the same token so too do the bishops of the Church (which is why they carry a pastoral staff, or crozier), and likewise the priests who assist the bishop in his shepherding.

At first hearing, there seem to be mixed metaphors in the Gospel today: “I am the Good Shepherd” ... but also “I am the gate of the sheepfold.” But the point is that the shepherd was also the gate of the sheepfold: he would lie down in the gateway to be the guardian of the flock. (As Jesus says, “I lay down My life for My sheep ...”) As the gate and the Shepherd, he gathers His flock into the fold, and protects them in there; and then He takes them out again to pasture, He knows the right paths and the good and safe places; he knows the pastures that will be rich and green, and will give life to His flock. The Shepherd lives His life closely with His flock, He is always there for them.

Jesus has, from the very beginning, shared that duty of shepherding His people: He called the Twelve apostles,

and they called others inspired by the Spirit, to continue His work. To be called to the priesthood is to accept that work, a work that is not one’s own, but is a particular sharing in the work of the Lord: a caring for the flock of Christ. First of all, like the ‘coming in,’ it means caring for the people here — in the fold, in the church, at prayer, at rest, reviving them with the sacraments of Jesus love and forgiveness. This is a sacred and unique duty, by which Christ gives His life to His people. And then, like the ‘going out,’ it also means helping the people take their Catholic faith out into the street, into the home, the family and the workplace: translating the faith into action, encouraging the people to be courageous in their following of Jesus by living up to His teachings. We need vocations; but to have vocations to the priesthood we first need holy families that prize the faith above all other things. If our community lives and believes in the Lord fully, then young people will not want a lifestyle of riches, luxuries, and pleasure, but a life of rich service to God: the sharing of shepherding the precious people that Christ has won to Himself, His Church.