

Homily for Fourth Sunday of Easter 3rd May 2020

Fr Robin Burgess writes

My father-in-law was a sheep farmer in County Derry, Northern Ireland, a man of great patience, ever willing to take any amount of trouble to look after his sheep and their welfare. They were his livelihood, certainly, but the quality of his care came I think from a deeper concern, even love for these loveable creatures. And they do need a lot of looking after: so many things can go wrong with them and they easily get themselves into all sorts of scrapes. On visits to the farm I would sometimes help with counting the sheep at the end of a day to make sure they were all there, and there would nearly always be at least one missing and unaccounted for, whom we had to search for high and low. No wonder Jesus made a parable about the lost sheep!

There is a painting by Holman Hunt called *Our English Coasts* (he also did the well-known *Light of the World* showing Jesus with a lantern knocking at a door overgrown with creepers, begging admittance to the dusty soul). He depicts a flock of appealing, delightfully woolly sheep, but oh dear, things here are going badly wrong. They have strayed dangerously near the edge of a steep cliff. One has already slipped further down and is tangled in a thorn bush. Two are lying down, looking very ill: they have probably been eating something they shouldn't, clover perhaps, which does not agree with them. A companion painting shows the cause of this disarray. It is called *The Hireling Shepherd* and shows the shepherd who should be looking after the sheep canoodling with his sweetheart. In this picture, likewise the sheep in the background are getting into various kinds of trouble. (You can find these paintings online: they are well worth looking at).

This 4th Sunday of Easter is often known as Good Shepherd Sunday, the Gospel readings on each of the three years of readings being passages in which Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd or this year the gate into the sheepfold, through which the sheep can go to and fro in safety. He contrasts himself with the hired shepherd, who is only working for pay and does not really care about the sheep. The Good Shepherd, by contrast, knows his sheep through and through, he calls them by name and he cares about them so much that he is prepared to give his life to save them.

In the British Isles the countryside is for the most part fairly gentle: there is usually plenty of grass for sheep to eat and not too many large dangerous predators about likely to attack them. The Palestine of Jesus' day was very different. The countryside was harsh and bare, sheep might need to go far and wide to find food, and the shepherd, who went in front leading them, might have to fight off fierce wolves. At the birth of Jesus, the shepherds of Bethlehem were, we remember, keeping their flocks by night. They needed to stay awake to protect them as the darkness could hold many perils.

It is of a major part of our Christian belief that Christ gave his life for his people to save them from their sins, but I have often wondered what exactly this means. It is sometimes suggested that there was some kind of price that God in Christ had to pay in order to redeem (a word that means 'buy back') humankind, but it is notoriously difficult to frame this idea in a satisfactory way, that holds together and makes proper sense. Many have preferred to say, more simply, that Christ gives his life as an example, to show how far God is prepared to go for his people, to the very shedding of his blood. This is the nature of God's love: it is freely given, not constrained in any way, not necessitated by any conditions, entirely gratuitous.

One of the clearest signs of this is the ceremony we sadly could not hold this year on Maundy Thursday, when Christ bends down to wash the feet of his disciples. He did not need to do this, but he did it anyway because he wanted to demonstrate the depth of his care and concern for his people, and in doing so he gives us a model of

how we can and should treat each other. Christ the Good Shepherd is the one who leads his flock to pasture, knows them intimately, lovingly, by their individual names, protects them from anything that may threaten them and is willing to go to any length to keep them safe.

The converse of all this, if Christ is our shepherd, is that we are his sheep – and we might ask whether it feels quite comfortable to be cast in this role. When we say that people behave like sheep it is not exactly a compliment! Sheep, after all, may be cute and loveable, and are very useful, but they can also be troublesome in many ways. As my father-in-law knew well, they need a lot of caring for. But then that is surely true of we human beings too. We are useful and loveable, but things go wrong with us, and there could be no clearer sign of how badly things can go wrong in human affairs than the current Coronavirus crisis.

In time we may be able to see more clearly how this crisis has come about, but many are already beginning to wonder if it is in some sense a consequence of our own behaviour, the way we organise our social life and how we treat the earth which is given to us as our home. Animals can only behave by instinct, in accordance with their own nature, but human beings have powers of thought and reflection which enable us to look at ourselves, assess our situation and work out how we can carry on, in we hope, better ways in the future. But for now so much is unclear. We can only live the lockdown as best we can and find whatever means will help us to endure the present until we can return to more normal living. Our faith and prayer can certainly help us in this, and in particular enable us to live with the questions we cannot for the moment answer without losing hope. Looking back in our lives and remembering how God has led us thus far is a good way of deepening our assurance that he is guiding us now and will continue to lead us into his future.

This last week I have been listening to a radio play made from *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Its author, John Bunyan, was put in prison for opposing the religious establishment of his day. In one scene his wife tries to persuade him to give up his mission and come back to the family, but she really knows that he can only continue on the way he believes God has laid out for him: 'Once you have set your hand to the plough ...' she says to Bunyan, words we might want to echo, 'I don't know what the Lord God thinks he is doing, but I dare say he does, and if he cares to make his mysterious ways known to us I for one will be very grateful.' Bunyan replies, 'And if he doesn't, then we must still have faith and hope for the best.'

Wishing you every blessing in Eastertide, *Fr. Robin*.

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