

Sermon Notes for Easter II

one flock and one shepherd (gospel)

Modern urban life knows nothing about shepherds from experience, so it is at risk of mistaken imaginings, many of them sentimental. The New Testament is much nearer to an agrarian society, which knows the task from experience. But we should not forget that it also inherits many themes from the Old Testament.

The shepherd envisaged is close to a contractor; he has both risk and reward. It is striking that the contrast is with the “hireling, whose own the sheep are not”. In the same way the old image of king as shepherd had been developed by the later prophets to exemplify lack of care and neglect – not even making a good return on the flock, which one might have thought was the reason for having it. Jesus is reluctant to claim kingship for himself – to be an anointed one (*christos*) or even The Anointed One is not an automatic claim to kingship (or priesthood, or prophecy), but it is a claim to a special relationship with God. Not the least reason for not claiming kingship is that kingship in Israel was tarnished both in theology (from Samuel onwards) and in experience (down to the Herods). Bad shepherds (as kings) were normal. Jesus was not eligible to be a priest; some thought him a prophet (though it was generally believed that prophecy had ceased and so anybody who claimed to be a prophet must be a charlatan).

There is a possible issue about the word “good”. Temple pointed out that the word used would more naturally be translated as “beautiful”. If this were classical Greek, true. But I am not sure that John (or indeed most of the other New Testament writers) observes a clear distinction in meaning between the two adjectives. It may be enough that “good” here takes its meaning from the implied contrary. Unlike the “hireling”, Jesus carries out his assigned function properly even though to do so cost him his life.

Many ancient commentators are exercised about a contemporary application of the term “hireling”, for example concerning unworthy ministers in the Church. I am not convinced that this was intended. The Gospel of John is structured around the uniqueness of Jesus (so all rivals present or past are necessarily wrong) and naturally does not address problems within the Church, many of which are inevitably between better and worse, or involve the discernment of whether a man is sufficiently bad that action must be taken against him. The “good shepherd” has been worked out in contrast to the hireling. So the text returns to that starting point, to consider a fresh aspect. As often in John, there are two relationships studied. Shepherd to sheep is as Father to Son. And the key concept is knowing, which is reciprocal in both cases. Again, classical Greek is unhelpful. This is not an intellectual relationship; it is not knowing facts about somebody. John thinks (as Jesus would think) in Hebrew (or Aramaic). The implied word has much more to do with an intimate personal (even sexual) relationship. Compare Amos 3.2: “you alone have I known of all the families of the earth” - which sums up the Old Covenant.

Do not think that the pattern is minister to congregation as Father to Son. That is to give the ministry a position which it does not have until the very end of John's gospel. After the resurrection “As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you” (20.21) does give the ministry importance – but only because by then the first step in the argument has been established. We are not at that stage in the current reading. Surely the point here is that Jesus is the mediator; the Christian people (lay or cleric makes no difference) are to him as he to his Father. That is how we are brought into a covenant relationship with God.

The conclusion of the passage depends on the passage immediately before the Gospel reading. The shepherd and flock relationship was in the Old Testament about Israel because of the unique covenant with God. And the idea of the sheepfold and its door rather reinforces this by being a spatial and so limited image. But that limit is not to last. There will still be only one flock, one shepherd and (presumably) one sheepfold. God does not change the covenant approach. But the Gospel extends to all who “shall hear my voice”. Again there is a temptation to use this passage in favour of Christian unity. This is not completely silly; it works against an easy tolerance of division. But it tells us nothing about the proper form of unity.

“I am the good shepherd” is good news for us; not by some strange human right, nor by God making an entirely fresh start, nor by our choosing the right one out of rival bodies, but by Christ's extension of the covenant to include even us. Thanks be to God.