

Celebration LINK

June 2012

On sheep and shepherds

Recently I had to preach a sermon on the subject of the Good Shepherd. It's a classic Christian image, which also reminded me vividly of the early community days when the 'sheep' sketch was performed by the Fisherfolk. At the same time, I was conscious of one or two slightly negative responses that niggled away in the background. I wondered why that was.

Sheep are seen as stupid animals, blindly following leaders who may have no good sense of direction themselves. There is something faintly ridiculous about the idea of a church congregation as somebody's 'flock'. We do not like to be called sheep. It sounds a bit insulting, as if we are incapable of thinking for ourselves.

Perhaps this was why the parable of the Good Shepherd was, for me, a story that had not been revisited for a while. Of course, the theology of salvation which the church believes to be enshrined in it was not in doubt. But when we look at the context in which it was originally taught, it becomes evident that its message was far from the sentimental (if comforting) story that we all learned in Sunday school.

According to John's Gospel, it was the Feast of Tabernacles, a major event in the Jewish calendar which took place at Jerusalem. Jesus' brothers were all going. Like typical family members, they are not impressed by Jesus' preaching or reputation. Instead of skulking around in Galilee, they say, why don't you come with us to the Feast and then you can do

your preaching to the people who really matter?

At first Jesus says no. He has too many enemies in Jerusalem who just want to kill him. But eventually he decides to go incognito. When he gets there, however, it's as if he just can't resist it. He has to start preaching. Sure enough, they try to arrest him but there are too many people around. Then things come to a head when he heals a man who was blind from birth.

They can't arrest Jesus so they arrest the man who was healed and haul him up before the authorities instead. They try to get him to denounce Jesus, but he refuses, so they abuse him and throw him out. This then provokes Jesus to utter a series of sayings about sheep and shepherds which were clearly directed against the ruling authorities.

First he compares himself to the gate of a sheepfold. Anyone who doesn't enter the fold by the proper way, i.e. anyone who doesn't treat the sheep in the way I treat them, he says, is a thief and a robber. He also compares himself to the 'ideal' shepherd who knows all his sheep. The sheep know his voice and follow him – and of course he has the perfect example in the man who was healed. He listens to Jesus but won't listen to the authorities who despise him and treat him like rubbish.

So the parable of the Good Shepherd is first and foremost a parable *against* something. It is against political authorities who are described as thieves

and robbers. And while it is perfectly legitimate for us who are far removed from first century Palestine to consider who or what are the thieves that rob us of joy in our lives, we miss something if we limit our understanding of such losses to our own personal feelings.

The beauty of the parable as a medium for the gospel message is that it can be applied with equal force to the entire range of human experience. There are plenty of thieves and robbers on the world stage today who treat their subjects like rubbish. There are plenty of thieves and robbers in ordinary secular culture that rob people of happiness and their sense of wellbeing. There are plenty of thieves and robbers to be found in our own insecurities and habits that rob us of true joy in life. Thus we see the multi-layered spiritual resources to be discovered in the parable.

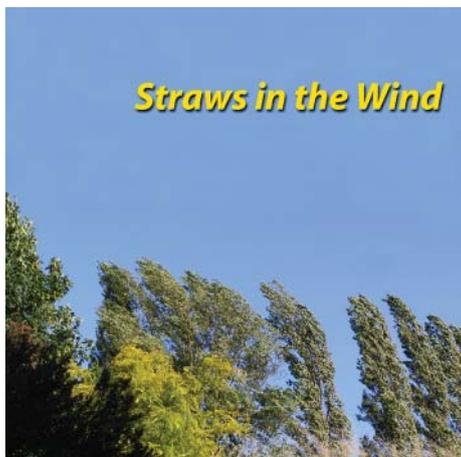
We understand what makes the Shepherd good when we recognise what the thieves and robbers are, and this may be more difficult than we imagine. True, a brutal dictator is recognisable easily enough. The power of materialism to destroy true joy in the Lord may be less so. And even though we may acknowledge the crippling effect of our insecurities, our inclination may well be to merely want them removed rather than to heed the voice of the Good Shepherd instead.

The good (i.e. the ideal) shepherd, according to Jesus, lays down his life for the sheep. All of us instinctively look for a shepherd in life, something to give us

Celebrating Pentecost

Some years ago, at a routine meeting, members of a church committee were asked if they had any ideas for a summer event. Phil suggested a 'festival of spirituality', featuring various aspects of Christian life with contributions from church organisations and individuals. The idea was to create a corporate experience in which as many people as possible could offer their gifts.

The idea was received with enthusiasm but for various reasons it was delayed until it seemed that it would never happen. But it never went away, and shortly after Christmas all the factors



Free mini-booklets contained sayings from sermons over the last two years. The cover above is 80% of the actual size.

came together to convince us that this was the year.

We decided to hold it over the Pentecost weekend and to call it the 'Tree of Life'



The 'Tree of Life' took several months to complete and provided a focal point for our worship at Pentecost.

festival. Two or three engineers in the congregation got together and constructed a skeleton tree using metal poles. This was then covered with papier-mâché and painted to create the branches. All the congregation were invited to cut out a leaf which they could decorate in any way they wanted, with a design, a thought or a prayer, or even just a photograph of themselves.



Our contribution to the exhibits included posters using photographs to illustrate a variety of themes.

The tree stood in the nave, from which most of the pews were removed to make space for exhibits and activities. On Pentecost Sunday morning pews were arranged in a semi-circle with the tree, rather than the high altar, as the focal point for the service.

We at Celebration offered an exhibit along with all the others. Part of it was a series of posters showing how it is possible to use photographic images

of whatever comes to hand to illustrate a simple theme or message. Another was a free mini-booklet in which each page contained a single thought from a sermon preached in the last couple of years.

The cumulative effect of the festival made it a significant event in the life of the church. A church has many organised activities, which often carry on almost independently of each other. However, something different happens when people are set free to offer



Example of how simple objects close to hand - in this case a spring morning photo of a rain drop - can be used to create a visual message. The image above was used to illustrate the theme of 'the precious pearl'.

themselves to each other as a church. It is the difference between responding to needs and a free will offering. We felt this was one way in which Celebration's perspective could be grounded in a local setting.



Remembering Pat

In our last issue we reported that Pat Allen, best known to our readers as one of the original Fisherfolk who came to Britain in the seventies, was close to death in hospital in Jerusalem. She did indeed pass away shortly afterwards and by coincidence Howard and Jodi Page-Clark were able to be at her bedside and to attend her funeral. They had long planned a trip to Israel which took place just as Pat was in her final illness.

Pat's spiritual pilgrimage had taken her from being a talented worship leader



Pat as she was in her Fisherfolk days

in the Southern Baptist tradition to England as a member of the Fisherfolk, then to Scotland where she first felt called to a contemplative life under the guidance of Fr. Roland Walls, and finally to a vocation in Israel as a solitary called to prayer, a ministry which she exercised for many years while attached to the Roman Catholic community at Abu Ghosh, a few miles outside Jerusalem. She loved to receive letters from old community friends and spoke of her commitment to pray for them and the community children.

At her funeral Howard gave the address. Friends around the world had been invited to email their tributes, but Howard and Jodi were inundated with material so Howard gave a simple address speaking of how Patricia's 'Martha' character – a busy person travelling the world with the Fisherfolk – had changed to a 'Mary'

identity, initially living in a monk's hut on the island of Cumbrae and offering individually guided retreats to the many who came to see her.



Pat's coffin with a single sunflower substituting for the yellow rose of Texas

The sisters she lived with were amazed to learn that Pat was a gifted singer – they had no idea. At one point in the service her song 'Close the back door, baby' with a jazz rhythm was played



Long time no see: Jackie Kemp with Dave Porter after the memorial service

from an old cassette dating from the 1980s. After the service Pat was buried in the Christian hillside cemetery of Mount Zion in Jerusalem.

In May this year a memorial service was held at the Cathedral of the Isles at Cumbrae, a very special location for Pat as the one time home of the



One last time at the Cathedral: Dave Porter and Bill Farra playing at the memorial service for Pat at Cumbrae

Community of Celebration in early days. In that period she had once expressed the hope that she would be buried there. Some forty friends gathered for the event, some of them coming from



A group of old community friends after the service

the USA and Sweden. A number of local people whose lives had been touched by the Community also attended.

Cumbrae is a relatively remote spot, so getting there was a potential problem. But by booking up much of the available accommodation it was possible to make a weekend of it. The Cathedral provided its familiar intimate setting for a simple service, and afterwards there was plenty of time for fellowship and renewal of old friendships.

The Community has produced a CD of her songs, entitled 'The Snare is Broken' after one of her songs. This is not available commercially but anyone interested in obtaining a copy should contact the Community at Aliquippa directly.

direction and protection. It is that need which makes us vulnerable to thieves and robbers. But the true guide to give us direction and protection in life, says Jesus, is love: a strong, sacrificial, laying-down-your-life kind of love. That's the voice that the sheep will always recognise when they hear it. That's the voice they will follow.

This voice leads us into a new kind of pasture, a pasture where the weak are given a place of honour and real weakness is seen to be, not vulnerability, but defendedness. It is also a place for knowing and being known. This is all part of the dynamic of sacrificial love. 'I know my sheep and they know me,' says Jesus the Good Shepherd. Community life was famously a place for knowing and being known, which may be why the parable had a lot of resonance in early days. But here we see that God is also part of the dynamic. Through sacrificial love he himself becomes known.

When it comes to our own interior experience, to speak of 'knowing God' is actually quite a tricky concept. In one sense we all believe we know God; it is part of our spiritual or religious experience. Yet the highest tradition of Christian spirituality also asserts that God is unknowable. Whatever language we apply to God is inadequate. He is beyond it; he is 'not that.' We know God not so much by his presence as by his absence. This is why it has always been difficult to prove the existence of God.

What then does it mean for the shepherd to say, 'I know my sheep and they know me?' In what sense do we know the shepherd? The voice of the shepherd is the voice of sacrificial love. We cannot know God apart from love. But sacrificial love also reveals to us how far away from God we are. It shows us where God is absent in our lives; indeed it shows us exactly who the thieves and robbers are. Paradoxically, then, we know God by coming to know ourselves.

To be a sheep is no longer a rather demeaning epithet or a slightly amusing figure from a TV sitcom. To be a sheep is what saves us from becoming a thief and a robber ourselves. To be a sheep is to hear the voice of the shepherd, the voice of sacrificial love, and to be so captivated by it that we seek it above all else. This, indeed, is our nature; it is what we were made for. The thief is a thief precisely because he robs us of this understanding. The thief is a deceiver, leading us in the wrong direction.

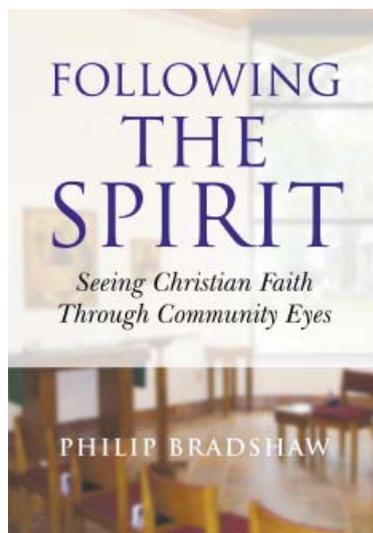
We know God, then, by knowing his absence in our lives. It becomes a deeper and deeper revelation to us as we follow the voice of the shepherd. We begin to understand what true joy is and what robs us of it, albeit dimly at first but then with increasing intensity as we yield to the insistent call to follow to a new pasture. In going out from the sheepfold we go out from ourselves to a new place in our lives. Going out from the sheepfold is a way of speaking about surrendering our will to the will of God.

Ultimately what the thieves rob us of is the possession of God within us. We possess God (just as we 'know' him) not

as a 'thing' but in the act of reaching out our spirit to him in our hearts. Paradoxically we possess God when we are possessed by him. This is not a mere matter of thinking thoughts; in fact, communion with the living God is at its best when it is without particular thoughts. It contrasts starkly with a kind of pseudo-possession where we fancy God smiles on us only because of some external object, activity or circumstance.

Pseudo-possession reveals itself when things go wrong. We wonder where God has gone or why he is not looking after us. The true possession of God within us is unaffected by the accidents and contingencies of our lives. As long as we follow the shepherd, its joy remains as a still place within us. This is the foundation, the roots from which all action in Christ's name derives. We are so very vulnerable to the thieves and robbers. Yet the voice of the shepherd is protection enough – so long as we want to hear it.

Phil Bradshaw



What the Church Times said

'It is theology rediscovered through living in community. It is nicely written with that authority that comes from lived experience...even more absorbing at a second reading.'

'Perhaps we need a social anthropologist to explain why structure is necessary but has to be confronted now and again by anti-structure to keep it honest - groups such as the Franciscans or the Community of Celebration.'

Price: £13 incl p&p (cheque to CCCT)