

## Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel gives us a beautiful image of Jesus, his heart moved with compassion for the people because they were lost and distressed, like sheep without a shepherd. This theme is echoed in the Responsorial Psalm in which we are reminded that we do have a shepherd, and it is God himself. Since this is such a favourite psalm let us pause to look at it more closely.

'The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want'. How good it is to reflect on this truth. Do I really believe that? Can I find the heart to trust in the truth expressed in these words? The psalmist experienced hunger, thirst and darkness in his life. He knew what it was like not to know how to take the next step, or where to go. Yet he did not forget to thank God for the moments of repose when he experienced the green pastures and the springs of fresh water that revived his drooping spirit. In the dark, when he could see nothing, he listened for the shepherd's voice and the comforting prod of the staff that warned him when he was lagging behind or straying from the right path. The truth of the psalm is demonstrated by Jesus, the Good Shepherd. 'I, I am he who comforts you'(Isaiah 51:12), says the Lord.

In the second part of the psalm the imagery changes. Now he is a refugee, hunted from his home with nowhere to go. And God opens the flaps of his tent and welcomes him and shares his banquet with him. In the Gospel we see Jesus eating and drinking with sinners like us, and here at Mass we are being welcomed to share a meal with Jesus and with each other. When the time comes to leave this meal we are assured that God will send his Goodness and his Kindness as escorts to walk with us, moment by moment guiding and inspiring us, and always holding us in his love. 'Surely goodness and kindness will follow me all the days of my life'.

Let us note, however, what it is that Jesus, the shepherd, does when he is moved with compassion. We are told that 'he set himself to teach them at some length'. When we look back on the mistakes we have made, we sometimes think 'If only I had listened. If only I had known. If only I had realised.' Jesus judged that the main reason for the people being so lost and distressed was that they did not know. They did not know of God's love for them, and they did not know how to respond to God's love and live their lives in a meaningful way. So 'he set himself to teach them at some length'.

It is this truth that convinced our grandparents to insist on Catholic education, and we have kept up the tradition, because we know that schooling divorced from the gospel cannot guide our children through life. It is this same conviction that is behind the insistence today of the need for adult education in the faith. This is why so many people have laboured long and hard to produce the Catechism of the Catholic Faith, published in 1994 in an attempt to express in modern terms the wonderful traditions that we have inherited. We belong to a wonderfully wise tradition, because Jesus, through the Magisterium of the Church, continues to teach us at some length.

But there is much more to it than catechisms and moral theology books, important as these are. In 1980 (9th February) in the English Catholic weekly, The Tablet, F.X. Harriott wrote of the complicated situations in which we can find ourselves and the impossibility of applying narrow moral injunctions if we wish to behave in a truly moral way. We are not helped, he

says, when moralists pound us with their heavy artillery. It is one thing for others in their compassion to share what wisdom they have with us and remind us of the wise traditions that are there for us to draw on. It is another thing for them to tell us what to do. We have learned to sigh and to look to God, the Shepherd of our souls, as another moral absolute whistles over our heads. It is one thing for a moral theologian or church authority to 'pick his way down the snakes and up the ladders of morality with nothing to confuse him as long as he can count the dots on the dice.' An army general may be able to 'draw his arrows across the fields and mountains on the map without inquiring whether the ground is dry or muddy or the peaks trackless. He does not need to ask if the soldiers struggling to fulfil his grand design will be drowning in a quagmire or frozen to the rock. In the sunny uplands of his mind Justice and Mercy, Duty and Compassion, Sacrifice and Survival, inhabit separate kingdoms, and live by treaties carefully negotiated and strictly honoured. There are no crossroads without a signpost, no mazes without an exit.

But down here on the common land where ordinary people live, moral problems are not so tractable. Justice and Mercy, Compassion and Duty do not inhabit separate kingdoms but are untidily camped in each other's territory. There are roads which peter out but allow no turning back, crossroads without signposts, mazes without exits. In this rough country most of us have to settle for doing the best we can, if, that is, we are not to sit still and make no journey at all. We can carry only a few simple precepts in our heads, and a magnet to fix the points of the compass and the location of the Southern Cross. We are suspicious of maps thrust upon us which never quite describe the terrain on which we are standing or the misty landscape that lies ahead. We are resentful when at moments of crisis, after picking our way forward over a long day's journey, the only advice the official guides can offer is 'Return to Go'. The most unsophisticated people, the wisest pastors, know this very well. They know that the urge to be good, to do the right thing, is as universal and as strong as the instinct to breathe. They by and large respect the moral absolutes without which there would be no beginning and end, and no meaning, to their journey. But they also experience in the thick of life itself that all too often the absolutes clash, and that moral choices are not of this or that absolute but compromise between them. To live without general absolutes is to live without direction; to live unrelentingly by particular absolutes is lunatic, and arrogant, cruel lunacy at that. What is needed of the Church is not a heightened barrage of absolutes, but clear evidence that the actual realities of ordinary life are grasped, and tactful, sensitive tuition in the making of responsible moral choices as they actually present themselves in the far from laboratory conditions of ordinary life. It cannot find answers to all the awkward questions; but it can aid us to find the least worst answer to the dilemmas we do in fact face; and help us to live with them.'

On July 20th 1969, lunar module Eagle overshot the programmed landing spot on the moon by 6.4km. The computer on earth was blindly dragging it to the proper spot, but between the module and the programmed spot lay a huge boulder. Amazing technology had brought the explorers to the moon. But to continue to follow it in the last minutes would have spelt disaster. Armstrong switched on to manual control and landed it himself in a safe spot. The directions given from earth were excellent, but in the actual situation, the man at the controls had to make the appropriate decisions.

We are very foolish if we do not listen humbly and gratefully to the teaching of the Church. This is a rich tradition, well thought out for the most part, and lived by the saints. What a privilege it is for us to listen to it from the lips of those whom the Spirit of Jesus inspires and

guides to shepherd us on our difficult journey. But it is essential to know that this very same Church insists on the primacy of conscience. This does not mean that we do what we like. It does not mean that we ignore advice. It does not mean that what we feel like doing is the best thing to do. The cult of spontaneity can leave us trapped within the confines of merely bodily gratification, or gratification of the ego, ignoring the more profound and personal longings of the human spirit. We have made terrible mistakes when we have relied solely on our own intuitions, and we have seen others do the same.

It does mean that, in the complexity of our lives, the Lord is our shepherd. If we are committed to prayer, and if we seek in faith the guidance of the Spirit of Jesus, and if we are open to advice, we are the ones who must ultimately decide the best way forward for us. Jesus continues to have compassion on us and to teach us - through the teaching of the our beautiful Church, but also through the guidance he provides to our conscience. Let us humbly reach out in trust and attend to the sound of his voice. Jesus himself will guide you and guide me along the right path. He will nudge us with his staff when we are in danger of straying, and he will call us back to the right path when we fail to heed his voice.

We are talking about 'conscience'. Quoting from the Vatican Council, the Catechism states: 'Conscience is one's most secret core and sanctuary. There people are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths'(Catechism n.1776). 'In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path; we must assimilate it in faith and in prayer, and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord's cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church'(Catechism n.1785). Here, as in every other matter, our central prayer should be to grow in love, for, unless we share in the compassion of Christ, we will never have the wisdom to know what is right. Paul prays: 'This is my prayer for you: I pray that your love will continue to grow more and more, together with true knowledge and perfect judgment, so that you will be able to choose what is best'(Philippians 1:9-10).

In the final analysis, the moral thing to do is to take the next step of love in whatever situation we find ourselves. This is what God asks us to do. There is nothing better we can do. And we are guided by the Good Shepherd who has compassion upon us.