

## EASTER 2

"I am the Good Shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." John 10 : 11.

The picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one which was woven into the thought and language of the Jewish people in first century Palastine. Again and again in the Old Testament, God is pictured as the shepherd of his people. 'The Lord is my shepherd', the 23rd. psalm begins, and also in Psalm 95, we have 'For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand'.

The prophet Isaiah pictures God as a gentle and loving shepherd (Isaiah 40 : 11);

He will feed his flock like a shepherd,  
he will gather the lambs in his arms.

The prophet Ezekiel has a grim picture of the shepherds who have been feeding themselves and not the flock. 'The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.' God is angry with such bad shepherds; they will receive their judgement.

(Ezekiel 34 : 11f).

Jesus took over the picture of the shepherd and made it the picture of himself. He is the shepherd who goes out to the mountains and the hills, to the valleys and the ravines to find the lost sheep. He is moved with compassion for the people, because they are like sheep without a shepherd.

This picture passed into the language and the thought of the early church. Jesus is described by Peter as the Shepherd and watchman of the souls of men.

(1 Peter 2:25)

Also in the new testament the leaders of Christ's people are likened to shepherds. The Christian leader must be the shepherd of the flock of God. (1 Peter 5:2). 'Tend that flock of God whose shepherds you are' says St. Peter to the church leaders.

It is not surprising then, that even to this day Bishops carry a shepherd's crook and the ordained ministry is referred to as a pastoral ministry and the vicar or rector is still described as the Pastor in many parts of the church.

I confess however, to having reservations about the continued use of this pastoral imagery in a society where the great majority of people go through life without ever seeing a sheep let alone a shepherd. I wonder about the wisdom of using terms like 'Rural Dean' to describe the senior clergyman who has his ministry in the city of Hull which, by no stretch of the imagination, can be described as a 'Rural' area.

Apart from these concerns about the public image of the Church in an industrial society, I have reservations about the habit of describing church members as sheep. "How is your flock these days?" I was once asked by a Bishop. My response was to object on the grounds that the people were not encouraged to behave like sheep in my church. The trouble with the 'sheep and shepherd' image is that, in reality sheep stay as sheep throughout their lives, whereas active christian people who are growing in faith will hopefully take

upon themselves eventually the role of shepherd - but I've never heard of a sheep who changed into a shepherd - and I sincerely hope that I will never see the cloning of shepherds.

The future growth of the church depends upon the development and awareness of the ministry of the laity - indeed I would go as far as to say the 'Liberation of the Laity' and such a process is not helped by all the talk about sheep and shepherds.

I believe that we should stress, that in the saying in St. John's gospel "I am the Good Shepherd", the essential teaching is that Jesus is Lord, thus echoing the old testament theme so often quoted in the psalms, "The Lord is my Shepherd". There is only one Good Shepherd. He came in strength to lead us back to God. With unwearied patience and love he bears with all our follies and our mistakes and our sins. And in the end he sacrificed his life in order to save us - his wandering lost sheep.

AMEN