

I begin with apologies to those of you who are unfamiliar with the wonderful game of cricket. A cartoon picture originally shown in an old British magazine called Punch, features a village cricket team. Each member of the team has a speech bubble above his head stating why he plays for the team. My favourite is the umpire who says, 'Of a sense of power. Like a Roman emperor, thumbs down and I can ruin a man's weekend.' The local vicar is one of the players, and he says, 'A merry topical quip in my Sunday sermon about Saturday's match keeps my flock happy.' I can identify fully with that sentiment. In my first post as a parish priest, I was a regular and reasonably useful playing member of the local cricket club. They liked having the vicar in the squad as the typical banter showed. Whenever I went out to bat or came on to bowl, a teammate would inevitably comment that we could now expect some divine intervention. So I suppose my success, when it occurred, was an important part of my mission. The next day, Sunday, I would sometimes offer my flock a 'merry topical quip' about the game, confident that they would receive it with great joy!

Members of the church, the congregation, are often referred to as the flock. It is hardly surprising because the image of the shepherd and his sheep is one that recurs time and again in the Bible, as a description of God's relationship to people. Today's Psalm (23) is an obvious example. And there is a lovely image in Isaiah 40: 'God will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.'

In the New Testament, the Gospel writer, John, very naturally ascribes the God-as-Shepherd image to Jesus who in the chapter from which today's reading is taken is described as the Good Shepherd, whose sheep hear his voice, who follow him, and in so doing will never perish.

Is it any wonder that the shepherd image became attached to the ministry of the Church, particularly its pastoral, meaning its shepherding ministry - the Bishop as chief shepherd or pastor of his or her area of responsibility, the diocese, with the symbolic crook or staff; the parish priest or vicar as the pastor who represents the Bishop locally, all providing a focus, an example, a good one hopefully, of the compassionate and careful leader who values each individual because each one is important to our shepherd God. The shepherd ministry demonstrates the Christian mission of searching out and bringing in those who have gone astray or who are not yet in the fold. It also speaks of unity and

community within the Church, and the hope and calling of all who follow Christ of genuinely becoming one flock under him, the one Shepherd.

The Middle Eastern shepherd led his sheep; they followed him. He did not drive or coerce them. And he used the crook both ways: to hook it round the sheep's neck to pull it into line or out of danger, and also to push it out beyond the immediate security of the fold, to find the pasturage. Pastoral ministry involves both aspects: the rescuing and the seeking out, the encouraging and the feeding; and also the sending out, the commissioning for service, the letting go of the flock as a community and as individuals into the ministry and mission fields of daily life.

Both aspects of pastoral ministry – the nurturing and the commissioning - are represented in our worship. God calls us, brings us together here to speak to us, to strengthen and nourish us. Then he sends us out into the world to get on with it – to find our way as Christians in the world of every day with all its routines and challenges. God lets us be. God trusts us, takes risks with us. How will we respond?

Jesus came, lived, died and rose again to give us life as God would wish it to be lived. He gave us all a way of life, an example to copy. He does not compel us to follow or obey him. He calls, he invites, he encourages.

One thing that is thankfully absent from his model for ministry is power and control. There is no place for that in the Christian life at any level. Authority, yes, but authority practised and welcomed as it is exercised through encouragement and education, compassion, and care. And it needs to be remembered that the shepherds, the pastors, remain disciples, meaning learners, never infallible, sometimes vulnerable, and who gratefully receive the encouragement and the advice of those they are called to serve.

In Christ we find the true Shepherd who provides for all the needs of us, his sheep. But to each other, and to all the people of this world, especially in our own parts of it, we are all, each one of us, called to have a share in his shepherding, his pastoral ministry. Clergy and other ministers may be leaders in that work, but they are certainly not the only doers. The Church, the Christian community is created to be an every member ministry, a priesthood of all believers.

Christian faith is never a private thing. Being Christian means being church, part of a community called together by Christ. And part of being church is looking out for others who are in the church, and welcoming and encouraging those who are trying to find their way in. Shepherding the flock as we ourselves would want to be shepherded, and without favour or reserve is the responsibility of all of us if we consider ourselves to be followers of Jesus Christ, who welcomed all, the so-called saint and sinner alike. We are the body of Christ on earth now. In the Gospel chapter from which we read, Jesus says, ‘the Father and I are one.’ That means that all of us who live in him are one with the Father too. The Father, God, is unconditional Love. We, like Jesus, are called to reflect and demonstrate that love.