

What seems like a century ago when I was at university in the north of England, engaged in the first step of preparation for ordination, I used to go, on the occasional Saturday, for long walks on the North Yorkshire moors, the Three Peaks and other such challenging terrains. Not that I was a particularly avid rambler, but rather the invitation to take such outings came from my eminent professor of theology, who from time to time liked to unwind in such an energetic way and he always looked for someone to accompany him. As well as enjoying some amazing scenery, it provided me with the opportunity to get him to unravel some of the theological mysteries which were often incomprehensible in his lectures.

On one such walk we rushed to the aid of a bleating sheep that had got itself entangled in barbed wire. The frightened creature had no idea it was being rescued, and as we valiantly attempted to cut it free, it struggled and cut itself even more on that barbed wire. When we eventually did free it, the poor thing was exhausted and bleeding quite badly. Fortunately, a couple who had come along and helped us, knew the local farmer, and one of them rushed off to get him while the other stayed to tend to the injured animal as best she could, allowing the prof and I to continue our walk. There were a couple of other sheep wandering nearby. It appeared that they together with the injured one had strayed from their flock. Unsupervised or unsecured sheep invariably go astray and can easily fall into danger.

A couple of weeks ago, our Gospel reading recounted the sending out by Jesus of his twelve principal disciples, the apostles as they would be called. After last Sunday's excursion for the beheading of John the Baptist, today's reading begins with the disciples back from their mission and reporting to Jesus. They are presumably exhausted from their endeavours, which is why Jesus wishes to take them away to rest. But they do not get far, and even though they went off in a boat to a lonely place, people tracked them down. And we read that Jesus had compassion on the people, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

These words recall our Old Testament reading, where through the prophet Jeremiah, God chastises the leaders of Judah who have pursued their own interests and failed to look after the flock, the people entrusted to their care.

Jeremiah holds them responsible for the nation's exile which was then taking place.

In Jesus' day, the failure of the political and religious leaders again leaves the ordinary people like sheep without a shepherd. The promise of Jeremiah that God would raise up a shepherd-king appears to be fulfilled beyond the prophet's wildest imagination in the person of Jesus. From the earliest times, Christians have understood these verses as referring to him. Who else could they refer to in the intervening centuries? No other significant figure comes to mind.

Not surprisingly, we had Psalm 23 to recite today, 'The Lord is my shepherd.' Early Christian leaders saw this psalm as also applying to the image of Christ as the shepherd-king and about his ongoing presence among us in the sacraments. According to St Gregory of Nyssa, one of three great theologians in the fourth century known as the Cappadocian fathers, this psalm reflects the sacramental journey. Gregory reads it as about being buried with Christ in Baptism where we go through the valley of death to rise again with Christ. And having been anointed with the oil of the Holy Spirit, 'our cup shall be full,' and we come to the Eucharistic table where, he says, 'we are brought wine which gladdens our hearts with sober intoxication.' Gregory was a most eloquent orator.

Pope Francis regularly reminds us that this 'anointing' is given to the Church so that it, or we, can continue the ministry of Christ in each new generation. Like Jesus, he says, we are 'anointed for the poor, the prisoners, for the oppressed.' We can translate that poverty, imprisonment, and oppression broadly, but it does mean that a Christ-like Church must be something like a field hospital for those in need and on the margins of society rather than an exclusive gathering of the comfortable and respectable.

This is the pattern of ministry that Jesus gives us in today's Gospel. We see Jesus immersed in the lives of the poorest, the neediest, those on mainstream society's scrapheap. As Jesus goes into towns, villages and farms, we read that 'they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak.'

While this Gospel reading speaks of Jesus' ministry within Israel and among the Jewish people, our second reading from the letter to the Ephesians celebrates the extension of this ministry to embrace the Gentiles, those who were once 'far off' as the text puts it, those who had previously been strangers to the covenant of God with his people, who are now 'brought near' to God in Jesus Christ. In Christ, 'strangers' of all races, social classes, and other so called 'differences' are invited to be 'citizens with the saints,' and 'members of the household of God.' In each generation, the Church is called to be a place of welcome, in which God's many and diverse children can find their common home.

Each one of us has an important part to play in ensuring that the organisation we call Church, both local and world-wide, becomes a people, a community that reflects the image and the ministry of its master, its shepherd and guide. Through this sacramental walk with Jesus today, may we be reminded of just who we are, and what is required of us, as perhaps best expressed by St Teresa of Avila:

'Christ has no body on Earth now but ours, no hands but ours, no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes through which his compassion will look upon the world. Ours are the feet with which he will go about doing good. Ours are the hands with which he will bless people now.'