Homily – 4th Sunday of Easter (B)

*Acts 4: 8-12; 1 Jn. 3: 1-2 & Jn. 10: 11-18*

If you pay a visit to some of the ancient basilican churches in Rome, Ravenna and elsewhere in Italy, you will often find that the apse – the semicircular end wall behind the altar – is decorated richly in mosaic. Often, towards the top of the apse, you will find two “processions” of sheep depicted. They normally walk towards the centre, their gaze fixed on either the gold and bejewelled cross (in early mosaics) or on the figure of Christ or the church’s patron saint standing or seated in triumph in later churches. Below these “processions” of sheep, there is often a depiction of a water meadow – with deer drinking from a stream, peacocks strutting between the trees, and groves of acanthus plants and flowers.

All of these images are symbols of our baptism. The meadow is full of new life, the new life of Spring, because of the water that flows through it – an image of the font. The deer are from Ps.42 – the deer yearning to drink of the water, just as the soul thirsts for God. The acanthus plants and peacocks are ancient symbols of immortality, adopted from the Graeco-Roman world, symbolising the new and eternal life of the baptised. And the sheep? Well, they have a complex origin in the Old Testament scriptures. Again and again, in the psalms and in the prophets, especially Ezekiel – Israel is the “flock” of the Lord, the sheep that belong to his pasture, the flock that is led by his hand (Ps.94). It is the Lord himself who is to be their true shepherd, and it was David – himself called away from tending the sheep – who was anointed to be the Shepherd-King of God’s people.

But there is an older image. If you go to the catacombs, you will find in many places a direct depiction of Jesus as the “good shepherd”, often with the “lost sheep” draped over his shoulders. That, of course, is an image from St Luke’s gospel rather than St John – although the two clearly run in parallel. It is not difficult to understand why that image should be so popular with the early Christians. Jesus, the Lord himself, the Son of God, takes the trouble to seek out the lost, the strayed, the bewildered. And, having found it, he takes it on his own back – just as he did with the Cross – and carries it home to the flock, to safety, to its brothers and sisters. It is a beautiful image, perhaps especially comforting to the bereaved in the catacombs, entrusting their departed family or friends to the Good Shepherd’s loving care.

In a sense, Jesus’ words in John’s gospel extend that Lucan image in a deep and powerful way. Jesus as good shepherd is not just tender, merciful, full of care for the sheep. His love is much, much fiercer than that. Jesus as good shepherd is he who lays down his life for the sheep – not just healer and restorer but redeemer. He is the one who faces down the wolf, whose attack would mean death for the flock, even though it will cost his own blood. And that is simply because the sheep are precious to him – as he says: *I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father*. It is a startling thought – that there is the same relationship between Jesus the Shepherd and his flock as there is between Jesus and God the Father, the same relationship of mutual love, of mutual “knowing”, of shared life. And it is a startling thought echoed by John in his first letter, our second reading this morning: *Think of the love that the Father has lavished on us, by letting us be called God’s children; and that is what we are*. It is a startling thought.

But it must not just remain as a “thought”, an idea to be cherished, a comforting image. Rather, that love which has been lavished on us by the Father makes a demand of us. If we are *already* God’s children, and if we are to *“be like him when we shall see him as he really is”*, then we too are called to be good shepherds, we too are called to lay down our lives for the sheep – for our families, our friends, our brothers and sisters in faith, for all those whose lives we touch. Pope Francis is famous for saying right at the beginning of his pontificate that the shepherds – bishops, priests, clergy – should come to smell of the sheep, that is, that they should be close to their flock, so deeply embedded in loving service that the smell of the sheep rubs off on them. All true, but I think it is only part of the story. I believe all of us, all of us baptised “sheep”, all in the flock of the Lord are called – to tweak Pope Francis’ words only slightly – to come to smell of the Shepherd, so close should be our union with him.

Just one last thought. On this Sunday twenty-seven years ago, I was at evening Mass in a church in Morningside in Edinburgh. If my calculations are correct, I heard the same readings we have heard this morning – and something snapped. After ten years of pushing away ideas about vocation, ten years of running Jonah-like in the opposite direction from where I knew in my heart God wanted me, I knew I couldn’t run any more. At home that evening, I came across a copy of the guidebook for Ampleforth – one of my friends had sung in a concert there once and bought it as a souvenir; I read it, thought it might be somewhere I could try my vocation and straightaway wrote to the Abbot, asking to come and see him. Four months later, having quit my career in Medicine, I began my postulancy. I suspect that – had I known as a young man the blessings which my monastic life has brought – I would never have run away, or perhaps not for so long and so hard. Yet Christ, the Good Shepherd, was patient and untiring in his search for this particular lost sheep. May you too find him so, all the days of your life. Amen.

Fr Oswald McBride OSB

21.4.18 – Feast of St Anselm

Bidding Prayers – 4 Easter (B)

P: On this Good Shepherd Sunday, let us pray for the needs of the Church and the World.

Let us pray for Pope Francis, for Bernard our Bishop and for all those with a ministry of service in the Church:

May they always keep before their eyes the figure of Christ the Good Shepherd and – modelling their ministry on His – guide, teach and protect the flock entrusted to their care with unfailing love and mercy.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for all those discerning their vocation – especially those called to the Priesthood and the Religious Life:

May the Holy Spirit give them wisdom and courage in their search to fulfil God’s will, that they may become diligent labourers in the field of God’s harvest.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for all here at St Benet’s:

As we officially begin the new term today, let us ask God’s blessing on all who teach and study here, on our staff who serve here, and on all who join us here for prayer. We pray especially at this time for those preparing for Final examinations.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for all those in need:

We pray for the poor and the homeless, for refugees and all those driven from home by economic circumstances or conflict, for the sick in mind or in body, and for the dying. May we follow the example of the Good Shepherd in being untiring in seeking to bring relief where we can.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us ask Mary, Mother of the Church and Help of Christians, to join her prayers to ours as we say: ***Hail Mary...***

P: Loving Father,

who brought back from the dead that great Shepherd of the sheep,

Christ our Lord,

hear the prayers we make in fulfilment of his command,

and grant them as best accords with your most Holy will,

through the same Christ our Lord.