

**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (Year C): Shepherds, sheep & our union with God.**

**First Reading: Acts 13:14+43-52: Jewish link: the beginning of the end;**

**Second Reading: Apoc.7:9+14-17: the martyred ‘People of the Lamb’;**

**Gospel: John 10:27-30: Jesus got his ‘sheep’ (ie, us!) from the Father.**

By long tradition, this 4th weekend of Easter is “Good Shepherd” Sunday, where the gospel is not about the appearances of the risen Jesus - as on the last three Sundays - but rather about his relationship with us. The Year C gospel is very short (yippee!); in it Jesus says simply: “The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice; they follow me; they have eternal life and are never lost.” This is the Father’s work, and Jesus and the Father “are one”. He is speaking about the members of the Church – us – and refers to the way our faith can link us closely to Jesus, and through him, to God the Father.

The second reading (continuing Year C’s run through John’s vision in Apocalypse) says the same thing, in its own weird way, but referring especially to Christian martyrs. If you read it, please remember that the language is totally symbolic – not to be taken literally. The martyrs “have been through the great persecution; they have washed their robes white again in the blood of the Lamb”; now they are safe and “The One who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them”. This means that they can enjoy heaven (“God’s tent”) for ever.

I want to apply these ideas to two important issues today. The first is this: the peace of mind that the Good Shepherd brings (even if it involves Christians being persecuted, as in the Apocalypse reading) does not mean that important disagreements and decisions can be avoided. The first reading refers to events about the year AD 47, during the first missionary journey of Paul & Barnabas. They were in the middle of modern Turkey, and Paul still saw himself as part of the Jewish community. However, the second Sabbath of their visit, things turned sour. Their relationship with the leading Jews broke down: these felt that Paul was preaching heresy; also they envied his success. Therefore, they had them thrown out of town. The upshot: Paul & Barnabas turned increasingly to non-Jews for their future converts. As I mentioned last week, the Church moved slowly away from its Jewish origin; this week, we see how & why it happened.

In the modern world, similar arguments take place. You may be aware that Pope Francis’ plan for a world-wide synod in Rome in 2023 has caused serious ripples – especially in Germany. There, the RC Church – the wealthiest in Europe – has been divided by the issue. Some bishops & clergy have had quite luxurious

life-styles in the past - making them unpopular with the laity; also, the child-abuse issue was seen as badly-handled. The result is that tens of thousands of Germans have left the Catholic Church. In response, some have advocated a view of Church for the synod that would reduce the clergy's role to being mainly parish administrators, with far less spiritual authority. This is the problem when one extreme results in the opposite extreme. This homily is no place to debate the German situation, but it shows that sharing Christian beliefs (even in the same Church) does not abolish disagreement. Personalities will out!

My second issue follows on. This weekend, we think about vocations to the priesthood, so we ask: what sort of person should be ordained? One problem arises immediately: images like “shepherd”, “flock”, “pastoral”, “feeding”, etc, still make sense here in rural Bellingham (with several sheep grazing on our parish land!), but do they work in the middle of a built-up area? I suspect that most in city parishes do not see themselves as “sheep” in any way at all; in fact, many may find the whole idea condescending. I suggest that the nature of priest-people relations has totally changed over the 50+ years that I've been ordained. I mean that the priest's task is no longer one of service by control (as a rural shepherd's must be); rather it is service by collaboration and sharing. Yes, the priest has the benefit of theological training – but so have many lay-people. Even when I was teaching (1970's & 1980's), lay colleagues in the RE department had the same academic background as myself. A priest's personality must allow him to lead by consent, rather than simply by ‘diktat’. Not everyone (lay or clerical) finds this easy.

At the same time, the priest must see himself as ‘set apart’ for the sacred jobs of teaching/preaching and sacramental service. Under the bishop, he has the authority and duty to hand on the faith, using modern means, (as in this e-sermon) and to celebrate the sacred liturgy. Any experienced priest has the humility to know that many parishioners are more ‘holy’ than he is: they have had decades of living the faith, often in difficult situations. I don't envy young church-students today: in my time, it was basically personal holiness mixed with academic study – pastoral experience only came when I was a deacon in a parish. These days, the young men coming forward still need what I had to do, but must also appreciate the smaller, articulate and educated laity we now have. Modern parish ‘shepherding’ is a different task from 50 years ago, so please ask the ‘Good Shepherd’ to inspire more people to share this work, but to do it, by accepting the world as it now is.

*Fr Jim Dunne.*