

Homily 4th Sunday in Easter Year B (22.4.18)

Good Shepherd Sunday

'Here I am Lord, I come to do Your will.'

'I am the Good Shepherd,' says the Lord. Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, which is traditionally the Sunday to take a collection for the priests training fund, and to pray for vocations. I was thinking about this title - 'Good Shepherd' and tried to find another image to complement the image of the 'Shepherd' but there isn't one is there? The Good Counselor. The Good Carer. The Good Leader. These don't evoke the same image, because there's something very intimate about a shepherd, even a modern day shepherd. In some parts of the world they have to physically protect the sheep, and certainly in Jesus' day, the shepherds had to contend with wild animals and put their own lives at risk. So Jesus chose a powerful image - 'I am the Good Shepherd.'

The word 'good' is interesting, because there are two words I think in Greek for good. '[Agathos](#),' which just means good. So you'd say, "Oh, he's a good doctor." He's efficient in other words. He knows his trade. Or a good teacher, and so on. You'd use that word in that context. But the one that's used in this gospel is the alternative Greek word for good which is '[Kalos](#)' and this means good with the sense of a relationship to that which the person treasures, that there's something good and wholesome about this person that attracts. In this case, the Good Shepherd knows his sheep intimately. There's a bond - and ideally, a priest, or a man considering priesthood, should be able to bond with his parishioners. It doesn't always happen of course, but that's the ideal.

I was thinking about this in relation to myself, and I thought, how could I get across the sense of vocation? I was inspired by somebody who was in their 40s, who looked like an old man to me, so I must now look really old! But one of the things that I think is important is to recognize a sense of vocation in one's own life, that each one of us one might be being called from one's baptism to serve God with the gifts we've got.

I can look back to being 16 years of age and having a profound sense of the presence of God, and I think above all I can call it an experience of grace. An experience of grace I really think comes when you're tried and tested, and you call on God for help, and you feel the strength given you to deal with the problems you're facing. Certainly our family had lots of ordeals, and I can remember praying to God not just to solve them, to wave a wand over them, but to give me strength. I can remember experiencing the grace of that. We all want a miracle, but God doesn't promise a miracle. Only the miracle of grace through faith.

And then I remember being challenged in faith at school, where we had three priest teachers, and the headmaster was a priest. In one of the RE lessons, a particular priest said,

"You know, if you took your faith seriously, you'd at least read the New Testament."

At 16 I remember doing just that. And again, I had a tremendous feeling of grace, that God was present in those words, and that I wanted to do something about this wonderful message. Unfolding in one's life, of course, a vocation has to be tried and tested. I went off to seminary, at 18, but I had doubts, as I was working for my degree. I said, I need to think about all this a bit more. I asked for time out, and that turned out to be a wonderful experience because I joined the Civil Service - and it seemed good money at the time. I've now got £122.28 a month pension. So it was worth it, wasn't it? For five years, 98 days service. Not bad for an Executive Officer. It pays my Sky television and my mobile!

[laughter]

However I was tested / tempted during that time, because I was told I was on a good career path, and it really brought things to a head. I would never claim to be 'good' as in the sense of Jesus - '[kalos](#)' - this sensitive, caring, wholesome, bonding leader, the shepherd, but even in the Civil Service, I still wanted to test my vocation. A vocation in the true sense is not about a job or money, there's a deeper richer meaning in the word vocation. I remember when I was first ordained, and I was sent to the Immaculate Heart of Mary parish. I've recounted many times the enriching experiences I had there, which confirmed that indeed I had chosen the right path.

In our own lives we can all think of better things that we personally can offer to God, but we sometimes avoid the best, because the best would cost us. And it's the same with a vocation, God is testing you to do the best with yourself, whatever that vocation is, whether it's a caring profession or priesthood. God wants you to give yourself in a way that is more than just doing a job. In fact, I don't think you could survive in the priesthood if it was just doing a job.

I always remember this feast of the Good Shepherd, for another more mundane reason too - because it was the occasion of the only prize I ever won in primary school. There was a draw in the whole school, for a boy and girl to take the Good Shepherd money to the Bishop. This tradition is still carried on today in our Catholic schools, and the money, collected during Lent, helps the work of Catholic Social Services. Anyway I was drawn out, the only thing I ever won at primary school. The Bishop of Leeds at the time was Bishop Dwyer, if any of you remember him? Catholic Social Services started from very small beginnings, and has grown into something wonderful for many of the most deprived members of our community. In the same way, when we give our little gifts and talents to God, He can make something wonderful out of them. Our students for the priesthood have taken that leap of faith and trust that God will 'fan into a flame the gifts they have

received from Him.' I have met some of our current church students, some of them quite young, only in their 20s, and they're a pretty impressive bunch. They've got that youthful idealism and 'can do' positive approach.

I've said to the Bishop, that when he replaces me, he should send a newly ordained priest who has done his time as a curate. This is a growing parish, which needs the energies of a younger man. I think people, and especially young people need an icon, a good energetic exemplar of the Faith. So a priest must have a love of God, His people, and the Church, and be willing to give of himself completely, like the 'Good Shepherd.' If you see some of our new young priests, they are inspiring! Those young priests I've seen have found their true vocation. Hopefully they and most priests will reflect a little bit at least of the Good Shepherd to their people, and, through their life example, will lead many souls to God.