

There are certain great periods in human history which mark a sort of transition in the fate of human aspirations, tied as it were to the destinies of empires and powers. Old landmarks disappear, and new nations and policies come into being. Not least important of these periods was the latter end of the seventh century BC. It's not popular now to say BC, before Christ, because you now have to say BCE, Before the Common Era, so as not to offend anybody who is not Christian. So, just thought you might like that little bit of 'trendy' new information!

[laughter]

In this period you have the fall of the great Assyrian empire, followed by the defeat of Egypt, which had conquered Assyria. For a brief period, Babylon reigned supreme, 'til in turn it fell before the rising of Persia. Sadly, each one of these kingdoms deported Jews from the Holy Land. So there was a lot of upheaval. These kingdoms had great leaders like Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, Necho, Pharaoh of Egypt. After Jeremiah's prophecy there was some restoration for the Jews, and the great King Josiah, became the reforming king of Judah. Now, all of these names have vanished from everyday memory along with their kingdoms. It would be incredible wouldn't it if the average person in the street today were able to name any of them. But in this period of crisis, one person's name has survived, and only one, as a real living personality whose influence is not dead and whose meaning today is no less important than it was in his own times. That man from the seventh century B.C. is JEREMIAH.

In popular parlance, we use the name Jeremiah, don't we, to say, "Oh, he was a bit of a Jeremiah, always moaning about his lot." Jeremiah is a living figure for millions of believers and people today - Jews, Christians, even the Muslims. In today's first reading we see Jeremiah prophesying against the bad shepherds - 'Doom to them,' he says. The bad shepherds were the kings and leaders of his day who'd let people down. Jeremiah then moves on, doesn't he, to that incredible prophecy that God will raise up a true shepherd king. We can see this, if you like, fulfilled from our perspective in Jesus Christ, and in particular in today's gospel. Today's readings raise questions of leadership, because Christ did something radically different in the way he acted as a shepherd, unlike all those who'd gone before Him. The question of leadership made a link for me with some of the questions in the old Penny Catechism. Do you remember question 85?

Who is the head of the Catholic Church?

The Pope?

I knew you'd say the Pope. The correct answer is - 'The head of the Catholic Church is Jesus Christ, our Lord - the Shepherd and Guardian of our Souls.' Question 86. Has the Church a

VISIBLE Head on earth? You've got it right now. It IS the Pope. Question 91. defines the role of the Pope. 'Is the Pope the shepherd and teacher of all Christians?' The answer is, 'The Pope is the shepherd and teacher of all Christians, because Christ made Saint Peter the Shepherd of the whole flock when He said, "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep." He also prayed that Peter's faith might never fail, and commanded him to confirm his brethren.' This definition of the Pope's role fits in perfectly with today's gospel, where Jesus refers to the multitude as "Sheep without a shepherd."

Those words of Jesus put a very Biblical slant on leadership. All in leadership roles are called to model themselves after the pattern of Christ. Jesus stepped ashore, and despite wanting peace and quiet with his followers, He looked at the crowd which had gathered and "He took pity on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." We know from elsewhere in the gospels that this pity wasn't condescending. Jesus felt, empathised, with other people in their plight. He felt for their need and he responded. THAT'S the model of leadership from top to bottom, the model we should work with in the Christian Church, and Society in general. All of us, when we have any roles of leadership in the Church, such as catechists, priests or teachers, and also in Civic Society as councillors, politicians or employers should keep this image of Christ as Shepherd, firmly in our minds. An image of SACRIFICIAL SERVICE. "Doom to those shepherds who have abandoned my people," says Jeremiah. Jesus is the 'new shepherd' - the 'Good Shepherd' - the pattern and model we are all meant to follow.



