

After the long readings in Holy Week we come to these very short Gospels for the Sundays after Easter. When you see something so brief, you tend to think it is simple. So I looked at today's Gospel about the Good Shepherd and thought, that's pretty straightforward then. But then it isn't. I mean the very image: the Good Shepherd. But what do we know about shepherds? Nothing much. At the best and as a Yorkshireman I think of Wensleydale and dry stone walls, little lambs and the shadow of the sun racing across the pastel hillside. But this is not how it was in the Gospel.

And I realise I have fallen into a very deep difficulty. I mean, if parables and analogies are meant to help our understanding, what a pretty pickle we are in when the images which are meant to illuminate actually cloud our understanding instead. An image we today might more easily receive would be *I am the good Internet service provider* or *I am the perfect advertising consultant*. So what I am saying to you is that we have a peculiar problem with the parables. They were originally meant to be aids to understanding – and they were – but now the parables themselves take more understanding than the elusive truth to which they were meant to point. And anyone who thinks they are simple is a simpleton

Well, feeble as I am, I must make a start. I have before me the short text which I have just read containing the statement, *I am the Good Shepherd*. We think that's plain enough. But I confess I am utterly baffled by it. Let's begin with the two key words: *good* and *shepherd*. It's only right and proper to go back to the original text. Let's look first at the word *good*. But the original Greek doesn't say what we would expect. You would expect *good* – *ho agathos o αγαθος* – but, when you look in St John's gospel, it doesn't say *ho agathos*, it says *ho kalos* - *o καλος*. This is not the word for good. It is the word for beautiful. So we have not here the image of the Good Shepherd but the Beautiful Shepherd.

Then we find that the Greek word for *beautiful* is a form of the old Hebrew word for *beautiful*. This word is *Yapheh*. And this was used to describe David. David was a shepherd. Jesus says he is the shepherd. David was a king. Jesus is the King. David was born in Bethlehem. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. David was the deliverer of his people by slaying the giant Goliath. Jesus delivers his people by his death and resurrection. Jesus killed Goliath with five stones. Jesus delivers us by five wounds. David was renowned for his beauty. So when Jesus makes this comparison of himself with David, he is not only making a moral comparison with the good shepherd David (*good*) but an aesthetic comparison (*beautiful*). Look, just for a minute, stop trying to work all this out, will you? Look at Michelangelo's statue of David. And, with that picture in your mind, think of Christ.

So what Christ the man gives us in himself is not just the expression of goodness, but of beauty. Now I begin to glimpse things that are too obscure for me. I think I can see why the original line *When I survey the wondrous cross where the young prince of glory died* was changed by the editors to *on which the prince of glory died* – because the original *young* was considered too erotic. And here is something perfectly captivating. Towards the end of the first century, about the same time as St John's Gospel, there was published the most popular book in Christendom. Everybody read it. It was *The Pilgrim's Progress* of its day. It was called *The Shepherd of Hermas*. Among other prominent fathers and scholars, St Irenaeus wanted it to be put in the New Testament – but he was voted down. The content was too risqué.

But, try as you might, you cannot avoid it: morality and aesthetics, the good and the beautiful, fertility and sacrifice are eternally bound up together: *the wondrous cross where the young Prince of Glory died*. Good and beautiful. αγαθος and καλος. And, while, we're about it, let's not forget αγαπη and θανατος – love and death

So do you still think the parable of the Good Shepherd was a simple tale for ignorant Galilean peasants? Shepherding is universal. The Greek word for sheep is προβατα – think probate. Think of testimony. Think of probationer – a promise.

In the ancient world, shepherding was the preferred preparation for kingship, for ruling. If you could show you could look after sheep, you might just be the right stuff to look after men. And in the land where Jesus lived there was the ancient Canaanite religion which every year was sacrificed the shepherd-king. This was a mythological re-enactment, of course. Whereas Jesus was the shepherd-king who really died and rose for us in the day-to-day realm of fact and history. All this is understood already, only a few years after Good Friday, and written down explicitly in the New Testament *Epistle to the Hebrews*:

*Now the God of peace which brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the everlasting covenant...*

And what, for God's sake, was *the blood of the everlasting covenant*? It was that painted, in the form of a cross, on the doors of the Israelites at the Exodus from Egypt at what became known as Passover. And Christ's blood was poured out for us, according to St John at least, on the fifteenth day of Nisan – the Feast of the Passover.

I forgot something. Let's go back to David for a minute. David the shepherd-king wrote *The Lord is my shepherd... he leadeth me by still waters... yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...* It is Jesus who is Lord, who leads us out of the valley of death and the still waters are the waters of baptism, bursting from the font which is the everlasting stony replica

of Christ's sepulchre. For our baptism is a baptism into his death, so that we may rise with him in his resurrection.

This shepherd and his sheep have to bear a great deal of significance. The shepherd is said to own the sheep. To defend them against predators. To care for them. And to lay down his life for them.

It gets worse. *Shepherd* is the title given to Tammuz, the god of the moon who was said to be shepherd to the stars. In the ancient world this shepherd was, after his dismemberment, the conductor of souls to paradise. Christ on the cross says to the thief: *This day shalt thou be with me in paradise*. And remember Christ was welcomed by the shepherds under the stars at the first Christmas

You might think all this is very complicated, but I am not even scratching the surface. For Jesus is not only the Good Shepherd but also the Lamb of God

But in all these things, in the matter of the deepest truth, we are not dealing with explanations but with the interplay of images. For the word is made flesh and this means that our truths are not theoretical but tangible. You are not invited to supply a professorial discourse but to put your fingers into the wounds in his hands and his side.

So to come back to the beginning, we cannot hope to use a phrase such as The Good Shepherd and think we can immediately understand it. And this is a general truth. The reason why new things are fascinating is that they come directly with their own significance – or with the lack of any significance. Fashionable things are fashioned. They require no study but only passivity – going along with the herd or, given my context, should I say *flock*?

You can't read the Bible as if it's this morning's newspaper. It isn't. Reading the Bible means going back and thinking the thoughts of those who wrote the Bible. It means entering their world. It means hard work. The sort of work we have been doing this morning. I hope you agree that it's also great fun. Keeps the mind alive. Keeps the soul alive. Better than Sudoku.

So what does it all mean, this whole realm of the Good Shepherd? I hardly have a clue but, if you were to ask me, I should start by saying that there are unbreakable connections between the natural world and the kingdom; between kingship and pastoral – shepherding – care; between creation, fecundity and sacrifice. And these things are not theoretical, not propositions of morals or politics. They are all contained in the one person who said:

*I am the Good Shepherd*