

Easter 4 Year B

John 10 Vocations Sunday

The 1973 film version of the rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar is one of the more interesting cinematic treatments of the Christian story. Using the framing device of a play within a film, it presents a group of young people arriving to perform a kind of passion play in the Israeli desert. At the end, we see the various actors climbing one by one aboard the bus which will take them home. Mary Magdalene and Judas are the last to board, but the actor playing Jesus is nowhere to be seen. As the bus drives away, we are left with an image of an empty cross against a setting sun, and – apparently – nothing more. Some find in this shot a disappointing lack of resurrection imagery. Others point out that a setting sun is bound to rise. But the film itself says more, because a close examination of that final shot shows something else – movement across the foreground. If we look closely we will see the silhouette of a shepherd driving his flock slowly across the front of the scene.

Sometime after the film was released and had enjoyed success, the director Norman Jewison revealed something quite remarkable: the shepherd in the final scene was never intended to be there. They took their shots of the setting sun across the extensive desert landscape, and thought that that was that. Only when they played it back did they see the herdsman and his flock. That powerful image of resurrection was there – it seems – entirely by accident.

It is not surprising that the church asks us to listen to Jesus calling himself the Good Shepherd in the middle of Eastertide. The flock which is his church is itself part of the resurrection life we celebrate, and the words “the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” are a simple and stark reminder of the fullness of love which we encounter and receive in our relationship with Jesus Christ. The Church of England takes things a little further, however, and asks us to unite this shepherd imagery with the Christian understanding of vocation. Again, this is not terribly surprising – the voice of the

shepherd who calls his own flock, and the identity of that flock in hearing and obeying that voice, are basic to this whole chapter of John's gospel.

But there is a problem with connecting vocations Sunday with Jesus' teaching on the good shepherd, and the problem concerns our use of the word pastoral, a word which means "like a shepherd". The implication seems to be that we are thinking about vocation not just because the Good Shepherd is the one who calls, but also because of the notion that a priest is a shepherd. That's true, but it's a slightly awkward notion in this context, because it might imply that a priest is more like Christ than someone who is not a priest. And this connects with our general embarrassment about vocation, which we tend to talk about as if the only people who have vocations are those who are being called to be ordained. This is clearly false. Every human being has a vocation, a calling to love God and to come to Christ, whether before or after death. Every Christian has a vocation to love God and neighbour, and to live a gospel life. And every Christian has an

individual vocation which he or she ought always to be trying to discern and to live out.

It is however hard to think about pastoral vocation at present, because the church has rightly been called to account for the tragic abuses of pastoral positions which have led to so much suffering: such abuse is evidence that there is nothing pastoral about such behaviour, but those words are no help to the victims. Jesus teaching about himself as the good Shepherd places at the centre of a pastoral role the willingness to place one's whole life at the service of others. The good Shepherd, lays down his life for the sheep. The hired man runs away, because the sheep do not belong to him. Those who would lead must do so with self-giving care, and true pastoral knowledge - they must know their flock. The role of the pastor is to guide the sheep safely into the fold, and to keep them from harm whilst that fold is their home.

Talk of ideals is of little use when those ideals have been so spectacularly failed. There will be much more public

contrition to come on the part of the church as a whole, and that is exactly as it should be. But it's also a reminder that vocation and pastoralia are very far from being the property of those in ordained ministry. The voice of the shepherd to which the sheep respond is not a voice setting out a life plan, or giving instructions for a long and complicated journey, with routes to be memorised and directions to be followed. The shepherd calls the sheep as they go along, he guides them in the moment, by gentle coercion, by steering this one here and that one there, by making sure that they know of his presence with them at every point in the journey. It is that presence which ensures their safety, and enables them to flourish.

The same is true of Christian vocation, which is not first and foremost working out the meaning of our entire lives. It is first and foremost acknowledging the presence of God in the moment, trying to live with God as we go about the basic and mundane aspects of our lives. Christians talk about vocation because we believe that at every moment of our very ordinary existence,

God is calling us to love him and to love others. All of the time, God is attending to the intimate details of our apparently boring minutes, hours and days, because everything about us is infinitely precious to him, and held and sustained by his infinite love. On vocations Sunday, you may be considering large questions about your life. But you may well not be, and if that is the case, absolutely nothing is wrong. Hearing the call of the good shepherd might well be as simple as taking the opportunity for one small act of kindness which presents itself on your journey home. If vocation takes that form in the here and now, it is no less significant than the Damascus road.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and the shepherd leading his flock is an image of the resurrection. The ending of Jesus Christ Superstar is sacred whether or not we know that the shepherd was not intended to be there. The point is not firstly what we see or discern, but firstly the truth of the presence of Christ, calling us, leading us, accompanying us in the mystery of human living. The good shepherd lays down his life for the

sheep, and takes it up again because the sheep are still here, and hence so is the need for the shepherd. Sometimes we will know the presence of Christ. Sometimes we will discern it with hindsight. Sometimes we will miss it altogether. And none of this makes any difference at all to the reality of the risen Lord, holding you and leading you at every stage of the journey we call life.