

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

## Year B

One of the most popular images of pastoral care is that of the shepherd who leads his large flock and protects them from harm. In the time of Jesus many herds consisted of thousands of sheep, their sheer number requiring highly skilled men to look after them and know how to cure their ailments. The flocks spent most of the year on the vast open uplands, from March to mid-November, and the winter was spent under cover. Hyenas, jackals and wolves roamed the hills, as well as robbers on two legs, and the shepherd was usually armed with a knife or a cudgel. The shepherd's care and courage was legendary. When the young David was anxious to convince King Saul that he was capable of fighting Goliath, he said:

*Your servant used to look after the sheep for his father and whenever a lion and a bear came out and took a sheep from the flock, I used to follow him up and strike him down and rescue it from his mouth; if he turned on me I seized him by the hair of the jaw and struck him down and killed him.... God who has rescued me from the claws of lion and bear will rescue me from the power of the Philistine.*

Shepherding was a hazardous occupation; outdoor living was rough. Sometimes the shepherds would build sheepfolds with dry-stone walls to make the watching and counting easier; this also allowed them to spend more time in human company. During the long dry season, however, they had to move their flocks in search of new pastures and watering places, and because they trespassed so often on private land they were somewhat unpopular with landowners. In common with tax-collectors, they were forbidden to hold public office or give evidence in court.

The wandering figure of the good shepherd, anxiously tending to his sheep to the point where he is willing to surrender his life for them, is the image Jesus uses about himself in today's Gospel. That mixture of tenderness and toughness, care and self-sacrifice, is one that summarizes his own practice of leadership. It is not a leadership of detachment and defensiveness; rather, it is a leadership of physical involvement and self-sacrificial love. In the good shepherd's foolish extravagant love, his own life matters less than that of his sheep.

The good shepherd is not an image of religious authority that is eternally pleased with its own importance, blind to the useless pain it causes in those

it leads. The authority of the shepherd costs the shepherd, not the sheep. His concern is not untroubled, his courage is not bloodless, his love is not detached. When we see how Jesus *actually behaves* as a leader, we see his tenderness and courage.

Jesus tackles his opponents, face to face.

He confronts those who steal the dignity of the little ones.

He names the wolves in sheep's clothing.

He is willing to leave his enemies looking sheepish.

He warns his followers about the rough terrain ahead.

He goes there before them.

He is defensive when people attack his own followers.

He is realistic about people's wayward ways.

He endures isolation and insult.

He faces his own fear but stays loyal.

He risks being slaughtered himself.

He does lay down his life for his sheep.

In his life and in his death Jesus sought out the lost and the least and the last. When he wanted to speak of a tender God he told the people about a shepherd who, when he loses one of his sheep, leaves the other sheep and goes off in search of the lost one. The shepherd refuses to accept the loss of one sheep as "just one of those things." He searches for the lost sheep until he finds it, and then taking it on his shoulders he returns to share his joy with all his neighbours.

That is Jesus' image of pastoral care, a search that continues until a find can be made. But of course, where there is no love, there is no loss. Some people are regarded as "no great loss". Other people are encouraged to "get lost." But all of us hope that when we are lost someone, somewhere, will be looking for us. Like the good shepherd.

The good shepherd is a challenge to all of us to look at our own way of leaving people for lost: "I have come to seek out and save the lost." Probably all of us know two or three people who have wandered away from the Church, who have lost their sense of belonging, who feel they have no community to belong to. How will they know they are welcome back if no one tells them? How will they be helped back if no one offers to make the journey with them? May we too be "good shepherds" to one another !!