

Sunday 3 May 2009: Fourth Sunday of Easter

I am the good shepherd

Readings: Acts 4.5-12; John 10.11-18

“I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

These are famous words from John’s Gospel, known by millions. They have been illustrated by artists down the centuries. I think of a 3rd Century stone relief I saw at the recent Byzantium Exhibition at the Royal Academy: in white stone, the young shepherd, carrying the sheep on his shoulders, both hands holding the sheep’s legs, the sheep’s fleece soft around his neck, curly like the shepherd’s own hair. It has the tenderness and warmth of a father carrying his child on his shoulders, held firmly by the ankles and nestled around the father’s head. Go across to St James’s park in the sun and you will see children carried in this way. It is an image of intimacy and trust. The imagery of shepherding is frequent in the Bible: the Patriarchs, Moses and David were all shepherds and so shepherd became the figurative term for the rulers of God’s people and impious kings were scathingly denounced as wicked shepherds. In Ezekiel Chapter 34, God promises that he will take his flock away from wicked shepherds and he himself will become the shepherd. He says: “I shall lead them out of the nations and gather them from the countries... I shall feed them with good pasture... I shall seek the lost.”

Yet while we have this image of God as the model shepherd, what is new and startling in John’s Gospel are the words which follow: “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Suddenly from an image of tender security we have the concept of something far more total and extreme. Our pastoral security is under threat and the one who loves us, and who we are called to model, is willing to die on our behalf.

Laying down one’s life... I remember as a young boy standing on the edge of a swimming pool watching a little girl who had accidentally got out of her depth in the shallow end and was panicking – I ran to get my father who was some way away from the pool and he jumped into the swimming pool and helped the girl to the side. I remember my father saying to me “You know how to swim too – you could have done that yourself, you could have saved her.” I had not thought of it at the time but I have thought of it many times since. Five years ago in another part of the world I was caught up in a situation of violence and conflict in the country I was living. The Community I was living in were being threatened by a militant group and a number of those I knew had been brutally taken hostage. My youngest brother was staying in the house with me which had no inside toilet or electricity. There were rumours that militants carrying guns had been seen in the neighbouring village. In the middle of the night my brother woke up and started making his way out of the house down across the back yard because he needed to use the outside toilet. Instinctively as I heard him go out I got up too following him bare footed across the yard and waited for him outside the toilet. My senses were alive, listening, alert to every sound and movement. It was an irrational action. If the rebels attacked I had no weapons or any means of defence. I was not in any way being brave because I felt scared and rather foolish. I was simply there standing in the dark in the middle of the back garden, outside this shed, because if for any chance we were attacked I did not want my brother inside this shed to be attacked without me. I was standing there not because I wanted to lay down my life but because I cared about another’s life. This may sound an extreme situation but when we love others small acts of laying down one’s own life are actually fairly frequent experiences. What does it mean to set down our lives for others? In fiction the choices look obvious; in life, laying down one’s life for others may not seem so

dramatic or so heroic, much more like it's the only thing we can do. And laying down one's life for others may be more about going to pick up a teenage son or daughter from a party in the middle of the night, or doing the shopping when you've got no time, or welcoming a guest, or clearing up the kitchen when you would rather go to bed.

In the Greek the word "life" in the sentence 'laying down one's life' is difficult to translate with any one English word. This word 'life' in Greek is 'psyche' - to lay down one's psyche - meaning self, or the ego, or one's own individual soul for another. The laying down of one's life could of course in the extreme mean dying for someone but it can also mean the far more commonplace extension of love where individuals put down their own self interest, for the sake of others. The Gospel tells us that this act of selflessness is in fact the very nature of God. It is what defines those who know God and differentiates them from "the hired hand". The hired hand does not care for the sheep but the good shepherd knows each one of the sheep by name and they know him. The nature of God makes space for the life, or the self, or the soul of others, and enters into relationship with them. And this laying down of self is also a taking up of self - it is the very act by which we become part the life of God: "I am the Good Shepherd" - giving and receiving, receiving and giving.

This laying down of one's life which Jesus talks about is not for some little exclusive group but for the whole human race. Christians have sometimes been encouraged to a kind of religious imperialism, forcing others to join their flock; nothing could be further from the truth which the good shepherd is sharing. He is talking about laying aside the ego self and thus becoming not a state to defend but a door through which people can come in and go out, where all are fully known and fully able to become.

Jesus says "For this the Father loves me, that I lay aside myself in order that I may receive it back again." Stephen Verney in his beautiful book *Water into Wine* interprets these words in this way:

Through this, the Father loves me - through this, Love actually comes alive in me - that I let go my ego self, I let go everything the ego holds onto, power over people, and even that most subtle temptation of the ego which comes under the guise of religion, the arrogance which thinks that it can control and manipulate God. As I let go, I receive back from the Father the ego transformed into the 'I AM', myself transformed into my true Self.

This morning as I reflected upon these words I received three phone calls. The first from a friend who wanted to know about my holiday and how I was, but when finally I asked about how she was she told me things were not easy: she had just picked her father up from hospital and was making a meal for him and was going to pick her mother up tomorrow, who has severe Parkinson's, from respite care so they could all celebrate her father's 80th birthday together. For her I know this is not sacrifice, it is love, but they could not manage without her. I then received another phone call from another friend who told me about Brother Jeffrey from Melanesia who had been staying at her house, she had had to rush him to hospital at 2am and had sat with him all night in the hospital and was worrying about how she could help him to recover from the operation and had phoned me to ask what food she should prepare because he was looking so thin and how she could encourage him. Then finally a message from my elder brother, asking me if I could sponsor my nephew on a sponsored walk in aid of the old people's day centre where he works as a cook. "Laying down one's life for the sheep" is actually I think happening all around us. The Good Shepherd is no stranger. I know for a fact the Good Shepherd is present and alive in this congregation. Perhaps we no longer recognise the Good Shepherd when he or she offers his or her life for us or when we offer our lives for him or her in the thousand small actions or words of each day. But look and see -

this everyday laying down, this everyday taking up, is different from the hired hand - it leads us into the life of God.