

Jesus said, 'I am the good Shepherd'

It is one of the great and classic images of care. Much beloved by the parade of generations who have gone before us, it appears frequently in glass and stone, in tapestry and mosaic even as the Shepherd's Psalm - Psalm 23 - shapes story and song, prayer and praise. The image of Christ the Good Shepherd is very much with us.

But in the dominance of the therapeutic culture of our day, it runs the risk of being co-opted to the religion of sentimentality and feeling, the religion of Hallmark cards and Happy Faces; in short, the religion of *"Gentle-Jesus-Come-And-Squeeze-Us."* We too easily forget the radical nature of care that this image of Christ the Good Shepherd presents to us. The Good Shepherd, after all, lays down his life for the sheep. The care of the Good Shepherd has death and resurrection in it. The care is not so much cozy comfort as it is challenge. It is something which the poets help us to see as well.

Against the cheery optimism that so troubled Thomas Hardy, for example, because such an attitude was unable, as he puts it, to *"exact a full look at the worst"* of things, there is the deeper realisation of Gerard Manley Hopkins that *"there lives the dearest freshness deep down things."* Thus Hardy's salutary caution that *"delight is a delicate growth cramped by crookedness, custom and fear"* can give place to a world seen as *"charged with the grandeur of God"*, once we realise that God has not only looked upon the bleak, black darkness of our very worst but has entered into it. Such is the radical nature of the cure - the remedy - in the care.

Jesus says, *"I am the Good Shepherd."* Through the eyes of John we learn just how radical an identification with us and with God that statement is. It involves an intensification and re-working of at least two Old Testament passages: the Shepherd's Psalm and the story of the revelation of God to Moses in the Burning Bush. The Psalm takes on an added dimension. There is an inescapable identity with God who reveals himself to Moses in the Burning Bush as *"I am who I am."*

"The Lord is my shepherd", the psalmist says. Jesus in the Gospels, takes that image upon himself and gives it a deeper meaning. Beyond the accompanying presence of God with us in *"the valley of the shadow of death"*, there is the God who goes into the darkness and loneliness of each and every death, the God who embraces our death as well as our life.

"Thy rod and thy staff" take on an entirely different meaning. They signify the cross and the rule of Christ. The God whom we have crucified by our sins and the follies of our wickednesses is the God who has conquered our sin and death. Christ is the Risen Lord and that makes all the difference. It intensifies the radical meaning of the psalm.

The strong message is that God goes with us, that the mysteries of life and

death are taken up into the greater mystery of God. There is something more and something greater than death, something more than the waywardness of our sins that distance us from God. The lessons this evening echo these themes: God gathering his wayward people back to himself out of the land of their alienation *"by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm"*, for God is the Shepherd God of Israel, in the lesson which Jim Gilbert read; and the swallowing up of Death and Hades in the cosmic victory of Christ, signifying something of the more radical nature of Christ the Good Shepherd, in the lesson which Claire Hamilton read.

Such things serve to remind us that the root of care is cure. There is a remedy in it. They go a long ways towards countering the shallow therapeutic forms of care as comfort. They recall us to care as challenge, the challenge to will the cure that has been accomplished for us, the challenge to maturity and to individual and corporate responsibility. There is in all of us, I think, but perhaps most especially in us as Canadians, the tendency to want to be taken care of. It runs through our current debates about health care and education, as if we are asking *"who will take care of me or my children?"* rather than asking *"how can I and my children take better care of ourselves?"* With the one we are passive recipients of care as comfort; with the other we take hold of the challenge of care both personally and collectively.

In the wonderful collect which graces this day and this week, Christ is identified as *"both a sacrifice for sin and an example of godly life."* The cure of the cross, radical and absolute, carries over into a pattern of holy life, the pattern of death and resurrection in us. Such is the care of the Good Shepherd. This quality of care is intended to shape the pastoral ministry of the Church, properly known as *"the cure of souls."* When it doesn't, of course, then care easily becomes patronising, belittling and even abusive. But this quality of care extends far beyond the Church. Not only are priests and pastors shepherds in the image of Christ the Good Shepherd, but so too are headmasters and teachers, coaches and leaders, parents and guardians!

Such shepherding care challenges you to maturity and responsibility. Sometimes it means, to use an over-used expression, *"tough love."* The care can mean, as some of you may know, a certain kind of *'picnic'* or it may mean a trip to the office of a certain D. Walsh or it may mean a month of serving in Chapel! I need not elaborate. Such care may not be a comfort; it will certainly be a challenge. And what is the challenge? The challenge is to embrace the cure in the care. It means accountability and responsibility which are there for you to take a hold of both for yourself and for everyone else.

Schools are inescapably moral communities. The challenge is to summon the confidence to name the spiritual and intellectual principles upon which moral order depends. Morality unhinged from any spiritual or intellectual principle is an empty morality, ultimately arbitrary, despotic and vain. There is no cure in the care, no sense of remedy.

The question of the principles which inform and shape the moral order of communities is a contemporary concern belonging to the current debate between “communitarians” and “liberals” in political philosophy. The communitarians - admirably represented in Canada’s Charles Taylor - recognise the need for a moral understanding and the recovery of virtue as the counter to the increasing disintegration of the social and political order. They seek to reanimate the social virtues of co-operation and community.

But is this really to name the spiritual principles of the moral order? Or is it little more than the former mayor of New York, Mario Cuomo’s advice to the current generation that “*the most important thing in their lives will be their ability to believe in believing.*” This is a contentless faith which offers no hope of understanding. It speaks of the need for traditions yet without naming their animating principles.

On the other side, are the liberals who, like Richard Rorty, utterly eschew any role or place for religion in social and political affairs, advocating with an almost religious kind of fervour that there is no God whose will we should try to realise; that belief in objective moral prescriptions is but a yearning for a transcendent authority to tell us what to do; and that belief in objective truth is equally such a yearning and equally futile. Exeunt morality, it may seem. Yet what is still wanted are “*moralising stories*” for without them the centre cannot hold - just don’t ask what they mean. But, then, what are such stories? There is a similar recognition with the communitarians of the need for something beyond the self-interest of the autonomous self.

To identify Christ the Good Shepherd as the spiritual principle of the moral order at King’s-Edgehill is simply to call attention to the central icon in the School Chapel - the image of Christ the Good Shepherd - and to ponder its significance. It suggests so much of what belongs to the integrity of the school’s history, and to its foundational and formative character. Whether or not you personally identify with that is another matter. The care of Christ the Good Shepherd is not and cannot be a coercion of conscience. Whether you are Christian or non-Christian, neo-pagan or new-age, Catholic or Protestant, avowedly atheist or quietly agnostic, nothing by default or nothing by design; it matters not, except that it remains objectively before you. The care that it signals is the care that challenges. It challenges you, at the very least, to maturity and responsibility, to mutual toleration and respect.

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Christ Church