

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER; YEAR A; 2020.

We are all familiar with the comforting and gentle image of Jesus the Shepherd. We call to mind the image often seen in books and paintings, stained glass windows, and particularly some of the oldest depictions of Jesus the Shepherd from the ancient Catacombs in Rome, of the figure of a man or boy full of life and vigour carrying the lost and wayward sheep over his shoulders. It is a safe and loving image, we gaze upon it, we read the relevant Scripture passages and we are filled with immense hope that the one we worship and adore holds us and carries us safely home.

St John's Gospel, especially chapter 10, is a fulsome teaching on the person of Jesus as the Shepherd. And while we quite rightly, feel ourselves embraced by the pastoral care of this most beautiful role of our Lord in his relationship with his people, there is also a warning. It is for Christians a warning that must be taken very seriously but alas, it is a warning that is being argued away and fudged by a culture that enthrones niceness, tolerance and inclusivity over and above the call to worship one God and Lord Jesus Christ.

This is indeed a very delicate subject and fraught with accusations of exclusivity and bigotry and even discrimination. So what is this warning that the Gospel puts before us? What is this teaching that makes us look like people who rage against diversity, according to the current cultures estimation? It centres on the claim of Jesus, and accepted by all Christians that there is only one Sheepfold and there is only one shepherd. There is only one way into this pasture of abundant life and eternal joy and that is through the voice of this shepherd and through the gate which is his presence. It is another way of stating the claim that Jesus is The Way, The Truth, and The Life, and nobody goes to the Father accept through Him. In these days of increase inter-faith dialogue and the move towards generic spirituality, making this claim, declaring this teaching is not very readily received.

"There are no certainties!" cries the modernisers, "There is no such thing as the truth!" proclaims the post modernists. And with these doctrines of the present culture, Christianity and Jesus becomes one of a whole mixed bag of religions, philosophies, teachings and gurus to call upon to satisfy ones tastes,

or to be seen to be pals and friends with everyone for the sake of niceness and not to rock the boat.

Archbishop Lefebvre in an open letter to Roman Catholics who were confused by the teachings of Vatican II on inter faith dialogue said this, "Catholics (who hold onto the certainties of Christ's teaching) are branded as misers guarding their treasures, as greedy egoists who should be ashamed of themselves. The important thing is to be open to contrary opinions, to admit diversity, to respect the ideas of freemasons, Marxists, Muslims, even animists. The mark of a holy life is to join in dialogue with error."

These are strong words, the language reflective of the 60's but nevertheless what is being said needs to be considered very carefully. The Gospel language of thieves and brigands is indeed strong language, but when we think what is at stake it needs to be strong; for ultimately we are talking about the salvation of souls, our life in eternity with the Chief Shepherd. And to put it even more bluntly the bottom line is do we believe Jesus or not? And if we only half believe him or wish to take him to task on the theology of revealed religion then we are making him out to be a liar.

The thieves and brigands have one aim, to kill and destroy, Jesus' one aim is that we have life and have it to the full. It is a brave person that declares this in the public domain today. But if it isn't proclaimed with all love and charity, with love for our neighbour and concern for all souls then we have Christianity Lite, no more and no less effective than paganism witchcraft and the followers of Jedi.

And when you think of all these different religions, all containing in themselves many good and noble things in order to traverse this earthly existence, ask yourself this, how many of them have at their heart God who becomes man and dies for our waywardness that we may have the means to live in holiness and in his presence for all eternity? Nothing comes near to this immense gift of sacrifice and love.

Jesus is the key to what God is like, he is the door to the eternal pasture the sheepfold of redeemed humanity. God is not just holiness as our Jewish brothers and sisters believe, he is not just an all demanding yet merciful will as some Muslims teach, he is not just an indescribable ocean of being like the

Buddhists think, or a multiplicity of Gods for every occasion as the Hindus think. He is love, sacrificial love shown in a crucified man who in the form of God took our nature to that cross and raises us up with him through his resurrection and ascension. To try and water that down or say it is just as valuable as any other creed is to be no better than a robber or a thief

Of course other religions and creeds have echoes and glimpses of Christ's truth scattered throughout their practices and teachings; St Justin described them as "seeds of the Word" scattered throughout their beliefs. Of course at the level of social concern and mutual respect we live alongside our fellow human beings, they are our neighbours, we love them and would even die for them whatever their beliefs. But there is one church, one faith, one lord, one head, and one path to salvation. Faith in Jesus Christ is faith in all its fullness.

Amen.