

16th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR B)

Someone sent me a funny video recently of a boy rescuing a sheep who had got stuck in a tight crevice. After much hard work, the sheep was finally freed, and began to bound off, only to seconds later get stuck in another tight crevice. They were back to square one. I thought it a good image for our relationship with the Lord, and I wonder whether the Lord feels like that boy sometimes as he tries to shepherd us?

Today's readings are all about shepherding, something familiar to Jesus' listeners, but not so familiar to most of us. In Psalm 23, there is the line, '*You are there with your crook and your staff.*' A crook is something we all associate with shepherds and is often present in children's nativity plays. In fact, it is one of the key images for the Pope and indeed for every bishop, who each receive a crook, what's known as a crozier, as a sign of pastoral authority in the church. A crook is an interesting symbol to ponder, and by considering how a shepherd uses a crook in the open, we can learn how a pastor in the church should exercise his position of authority.

Firstly, because it is usually several feet long, a crook is used to guide sheep. In a gentle way, the shepherd can touch his sheep with the crook to help them to stay on the right path. Similarly, a pastor is called, by word and example, to help the faithful stay on the right path that is the narrow way that leads to eternal life. Often this involves accompaniment and encouragement and can be gentle because we are walking in the same general direction.

Secondly, a crook can be used to direct sheep more forcefully and free them when they get stuck. This is when the hook part of the crook is used. In the same way, a good pastor needs at times to be challenging in ministry and say things that some people may not want to hear. This becomes more important in cultures where messages and ways of life promoted run in directions contrary to the straight and narrow path of the Lord. It is not an easy or enjoyable task but it is an essential task if pastors are to truly love and care for their flock. Good pastors want every person in their care to reach heaven and will sacrifice their reputation or popularity to help that happen.

Thirdly, because crooks are essentially long sticks, they can be used as a weapon by shepherds to ward off predators. Similarly, a good pastor will at times need to fight against those who pose a threat to their congregation. Again, in these situations his words may need to be harsh, although always said in truth and love. He will need to speak out, at times, against false idols being offered to his people, or indeed false messages and even ideologies that do not lead people to the kingdom of heaven. Sadly, these are on the rise in our present day, not least in the whole realm of human sexuality and gender, or the undermining of the dignity of human life in the womb or at the end of life, to name only a few examples. Such attacks are cunning because they appear as good and come under the guise of human 'rights'. As with subtle temptations, they present as something entirely good, and often do contain some good. As such, they can confuse many of the faithful. But as with all ideologies, their true colours gradually begin to show and they become like a god in themselves to which everyone else must be forced to bow and not even express disagreement. Even more, then, do pastors need to speak out in order to protect and to guide the flock along the only way that leads to eternal life.

Thankfully, pastors are not expected to do all this in their own strength. Rather, they share in the ministry of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and allow the Lord to minister in and through them. In the gospels you see the Lord employing his shepherd's crook, as it were, in these ways. At times he is very gentle and encouraging, at other times he is more challenging, and there are also many occasions where he speaks out forcefully. In every action and word, however, Jesus remains the Good Shepherd because his ultimate desire is to lead us home to heaven.

God bless,

Fr Andy