

Sermon for Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> May 2017 (Easter IV)

Today's Epistle and Gospel were both short. So it may be worth saying something about the context of the Gospel reading. Of course, when Jesus calls himself a shepherd, we know what that means: we are familiar with the Old Testament idea of God as a shepherd, and of us as sheep who keep wandering off and need to be looked after. But there is another context that is not so obvious. Today's Gospel immediately follows a passage in which Jesus has been challenged by a group of Pharisees. Jesus has cured a man who was born blind. The Pharisees first refuse to believe in the miracle, then they push away the man who was healed because he insists that it was Jesus who healed him.

In today's Gospel Jesus is saying that he is the true shepherd: the one who truly cares for the sheep; the one who gives them the truth. There are others who pretend to be true shepherds, but they are not: they are a danger to the sheep. Jesus must have these Pharisees in mind; no doubt others too, but definitely the Pharisees. Now, that may seem neither interesting nor surprising, because you often find the Pharisees being criticized in the New Testament. And this may seem of little relevance to us; we needn't be concerned with the different sects within first-century Judaism. But actually it is highly relevant to us. We need to stop and ask: who are today's Pharisees? Are the Pharisees - ourselves?

It might be a good thing if we were. The Pharisees were the most pious, the most God-fearing people around. Their equivalent today is the people who go to church or to chapel regularly, who do all the things they are supposed to do, and more. They think of themselves as dedicating their lives to the service of God. Nicodemus was a Pharisee; so was St Paul, and St Paul describes himself – *proudly* describes himself - as a Pharisee, long after his conversion to Christianity. So there is nothing wrong with Pharisees as such. So why should Jesus regard the Pharisees – or rather, *some* of the Pharisees – as a danger to the sheep?

The answer, of course, is that for too many of the Pharisees their piety is, in a sense, superficial. People sometimes say it is just external, but that's not fair: often they go in for much private prayer and fasting, and they quite honestly think of themselves as trying their hardest to do all that God requires of them, and more. They are honest in thinking this, but they are deceiving themselves, because their motivation is not right. Nobody, in fact, can be quite sure of what his or her motivation is: often we think we are acting for the sake of others, when our real motivation is that we want to think well of ourselves, and to say to ourselves (very quietly) that we aren't doing too badly. Then we are just like the Pharisee in the Temple in Luke 18, who thanks God in exactly this way. The tax collector, who prays beside him, just says, "God be merciful to me, a sinner".

And Jesus says that the tax collector “went down to his home justified, rather than the other” – rather than the dutifully observant Pharisee.

It is a disturbing thought, when we are trying our hardest to do all the things we ought to do, that we may well be deceiving ourselves, and missing out on what is really important. The Gospels, and perhaps John’s above all, at least make clear what Jesus thinks *is* really important. Perhaps there are two things that Jesus thinks really important: love, and belief. But these words have been so overused that they have a threadbare feel nowadays, and we need to stop and ask what Jesus means by them.

In the New Testament, the Greek word that is so often translated “belief” basically means “trust”. And this is what it must mean, in at least the great majority of those cases where Jesus asks us to “believe” something. It is difficult to see that it would even make sense to tell people to believe something, or *require* of people that they believe something, or suggest they will be *rewarded* if they believe something; for you can’t believe something just like that. Some people actually think that a benevolent God will punish people unless they manage to believe in his existence; but no benevolent god could be remotely like that. What would you think of a human being who sought to punish everyone who didn’t believe in his or her existence?

I can *persuade* you of something, perhaps, but that takes argument. If you are ordered to believe that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father only, and not from the Son, you can’t just *do* it; and that applies even if you know what it actually means. Most people don’t even pretend to know what it means; the question of what it means has long been debated, both amongst theologians and amongst philosophers. But when Jesus asks us to *trust* him, and to *trust* in God, that is rather different. It’s true that you would be *unwise* to trust somebody just because they asked you to; you need some evidence that this isn’t the sort of person that lets you down. But Jesus gives us plenty of evidence for that. His whole earthly life gives us evidence for that, not least his crucifixion and resurrection. He gives us no evidence at all for whether the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son, and I can’t imagine that he would have minded in the least what we thought about it. The Pharisees didn’t debate that question, of course, but they spent a lot of their time arguing about questions of much the same kind.

So much for the word “belief”, or better, the word “trust”. The word “love” has so many different meanings that it is almost useless, and here the Greek word “agapé”, which it translates, has some ambiguity too – though less than the English word “love” does. When we think of love we commonly think first of a powerful internal feeling about a particular individual, a feeling which may or may not be related to sexual desire. Jesus asks us to love one another, but obviously not in that sense. What Jesus asks is that we should care for one another, and when he says to Peter “feed my sheep” that is what he means: Peter should care for others by helping them to care for one

another. This does not need to involve any emotion at all, but when it does, it is emotion of a quite different kind from the feeling of love that one can have for one particular individual, to the exclusion of others. It is something that extends to everyone. The emotion, the inner feeling, is really irrelevant here, except insofar as it may help us to look after other people's needs. What matters is the helping of those who need help, and helping them *because* they need help rather than because it makes us feel good. What feelings we happen to have are neither here nor there.

We saw that, in action, in today's first reading, which was from the Acts of the Apostles. The community shares all things in common, and it gives away things away to everyone who is in need. They do this not to please themselves, but because they have come to see it is the right thing to do: the thing that God requires of them. The sharing of things in common is of course impracticable beyond a certain point, but contributing to the needs of others is perfectly practicable for most of us. Jesus asks us to do that, and not just as a matter of religious duty: the Pharisee dutifully gave away a tenth of his income because the law required it. Jesus asks us to care.

But here once again words can trip us up, for there are different kinds of caring. Nobody needs to be told that the amount of remediable suffering in this world at this time is far beyond the power of our imagination to grasp. Television shots of starving children move people's emotions powerfully, especially if they are good-looking children, and for a short time money pours in to charities that are trying to help. This is *not* what Jesus is asking of us. He is asking that we care for everyone that we can help, for everyone that needs our care, whether or not there is a television camera nearby; and if they are ugly old men instead of good-looking children, the same applies. He is *not* asking us to get worked up about them emotionally. He is asking us to act: and to act *for the sake of* these people, not because we have seen them on television, not because it gives us credit with God, but because they are people: they, like us, are children of God.

There is a debate amongst philosophers at present about how far our responsibilities really extend in this direction. Should we not make the best provision first for our own families and friends, and perhaps for the people of our city or country? Why should we let in immigrants from foreign lands if it is going to cost us something? There is an attraction to that argument, as there always is to arguments that have *something* right about them, even though they lead to the wrong conclusion. What is right is that we *do* have a special responsibility to those close to us. If everyone takes on that responsibility to take particular care of those close to them, that is best for everyone in the longer run. But we *also* have the broader responsibility to care for those who are distant, those whom we have never seen and never will see, but who badly need our help. And this is no less of a responsibility. The misleading argument implies that our responsibilities stop with those who are close to us, and they do not.

We can reach the same conclusion by purely rational means; which is not surprising, for God is the supremely rational being. As human beings, we ourselves are rational beings; not wholly so, but rational all the same, and for that reason intrinsically valuable. Another way of putting the same point is to say that we are made in God's image. If we are intrinsically valuable as human beings, so are all other human beings. And wherever they are, however far away they live or *try* to live, they have the same intrinsic value as we do: no greater *but no less*. When Jesus tells us to love one another, he is telling us to recognize that fact, and to act accordingly: to view everyone, wherever they may be and whatever their circumstances, as having that intrinsic value – as being equally a child of God.