



JESUIT  
INSTITUTE  
SOUTH  
AFRICA

## Homily

### 4th Sunday of Easter – Year B

#### GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY

Anthony Egan SJ

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, I was going to talk about the countercultural witness of the Christian vocation, of how Jesus' self-identification with the despised caste of shepherds is a model for all seeking a vocation, particularly those considering priesthood or the life of the vowed religious. From that, I was going to talk about the willingness to become marginal for the reign of God as a sign of vocation. Indeed, concluding that anyone who considers such a life as a means for social advancement, prestige and power in the church are in it from less than pure motives...

Unfortunately, though I still agree with the last observations, I cannot use the marginal shepherd line of thought to make this claim.

It's a popular myth – perhaps even a populist myth – that shepherds were marginal or disreputable figures in Jesus' time. It is often raised as an image at Christmastime: the marginal Jesus in a stable visited by marginal folk. At very least, the profession of shepherd is claimed to have declined in esteem since the time a shepherd boy named David was made king of Israel.

There is no evidence, however, that this is the case.

Some thinkers in the ancient world had a low view of shepherds. Aristotle, for example, once said that among people, *"the laziest are shepherds, who lead an idle life, and get their subsistence without trouble from tame animals; their flocks wandering from place to place in search of pasture, they are compelled to follow them, cultivating a sort of living farm."* But Aristotle was not Jewish but Greek – and how far the majority of Jews of Jesus' day took him seriously is doubtful! So 'Bye, bye!' the myth of the disreputable shepherd!

What of the claim that shepherds were religious outcasts? Apart from the point that many, perhaps the majority of Jews, were for various reasons less than perfect in their religious observance. There is no evidence, either, that the rabbis of Jesus' day considered shepherds *in particular* religious outcasts. What little and conflicting evidence, as Jewish scholars point out, comes from *later*, and often contradictory, rabbinic texts.

We can say that shepherds were basically poor but probably not the poorest of the poor. They were, insofar as they were illiterate, not educated – but neither were most of the population. Yet we can say that they provided an important service of tending and protecting sheep and goats, an essential service in an agrarian economy. Though a shepherd was not a ruler, he (and evidence suggests that most if not all were men in Jesus' time) was a vital figure in society without whom the economy would grind to a halt. They were not unlike the essential services workers – factory workers, shop assistants etc. – who keep society crawling along during the Covid lockdown.

Tracing the image of shepherd leader back to David, and read with such texts as 1 Peter 5:2, and a very different emerges: what we today would call servant leadership. The shepherd who protects sheep from wolves and thieves. The shepherd who would lead the sheep from the front. Who cared for the sheep though he knew that he ultimately had no real power over their lives; the sheep belong – ultimately to the farmer. Despite that, the shepherds treated the sheep as if they had a greater stake in their wellbeing than one might expect of a ‘hired hand’.

What might we make of this as we reflect on vocation? I want to distinguish between vocation to the priesthood and religious life – the ‘specific intention’ behind today – and the Christian vocation, of which the former is a part.

First, priesthood and religious life. We who choose this part of life believe that God is somehow calling us to it. This is by no means a simple thing. It is often said – because it’s true! – that one joins for mixed motives and those who stay will stay for possibly different motives. The Good Shepherd metaphor suggests not only the better reasons for entry but also for staying. Priests and religious hold positions of authority and leadership in the church – to think otherwise is frankly delusional and protestations to the contrary are either naïve or deceptive.

But, and here is the rub, to enter priesthood or religious life solely for power over ‘the sheep’ is both dangerous and delusional. It is dangerous because it undermines the role of the shepherd: the one who leads the sheep is the farmer. The shepherd represents the farmer. It is not power over the people on its own – insofar as there is power, it is a delegated authority that comes from God and from the whole people of God. Priests serve both in persona Christi and in persona ecclesia – on behalf of Christ and on behalf of the whole Christian assembly. Religious men and women who are not ordained also serve as shepherds by their particular witness to Christ within the Christian community.

So, to anyone considering the priesthood or the religious life, beware: don’t confuse the shepherd and the farmer!

Second, the Christian vocation. This is the broader calling, to serve Christ in the rough and tumble of ordinary life. Paradoxically, while not bound by the vows and promises of priesthood and religious life, this is perhaps the more difficult. It is not just about choosing a career or job but entails for the Christian the challenge to live one’s life work as a witness to Christ – without the trappings of habits and collars, church structures and daily rituals. It challenges us to live lives that witness to Christ by one’s daily practice, in work and in how we run our households. There is a difference between just doing a job and raising a family and making work and family a sign of serving God.

The Good Shepherd of the Christian vocation is ultimately a calling to lead by example: caring, protecting, leading in a manner rooted in service, knowing that everything – work and family alike – belongs ultimately to the Farmer, to God.