

## Homily: Comfort for the afflicted

In an old cliché, preaching is said to be intended “to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable”.<sup>1</sup>

There is a good deal of comfort to be found in the image of the Good Shepherd which forms the focus of our readings today (although the actual “I am the good shepherd” statement of Jesus is found in the verse following our gospel selection for today). I remember in my mid-teens joining with my grandmother in singing the Twenty-Third Psalm, *The Lord’s my shepherd*, to my great-aunt Mabel as she lay dying in hospital. The psalm’s imagery of God as the Good Shepherd who provides for, refreshes, protects and leads the sheep, the Good Shepherd who goes with us even into the valley of death, the Good Shepherd who honours us in the face of our enemies ... this imagery provides deep assurance for us when we’re going through tough times.

There is deep assurance too in the metaphors Jesus uses in John 10:1-10. We can take comfort knowing that we are in relationship (“he calls his own by name”) with the true, faithful, Shepherd who really does hold the wellbeing (“life to the full”) of the flock as his primary concern, and are not in the care of an imposter with nefarious motives.

I expect that some among us will, right now in the midst of what the pandemic has brought upon us, need comfort. Know, in the midst of all this, that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who walks with you and has your welfare at heart: listen for his gentle voice.

In this time when many are facing financial difficulty, when the Government is forced to undertake extraordinary economic policy measures, and when groups of people and agencies are finding new ways of banding together to support those most in need, I find a fresh relevance as I read about the characteristics of the early Church in Acts 2:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. (verses 44-45)

---

<sup>1</sup> If you’re interested in pursuing the origins of the phrase (which was first applied to newspaper journalism), take a look here: <https://www.dictionaryofchristianese.com/god-comforts-the-afflicted-and-afflicts-the-comfortable/>

But perhaps these are verses that might “afflict the comfortable”! Over the years, various commentators have seen these verses as support for a form of communism, and have therefore responded either with approval, or more often with some way of trying to bracket them out – along the lines of “they can’t be intended practically, because otherwise the members of the Christian community would eventually be left with no property at all!”, or “where then would be the incentive to work?”

Acts 2 sounds quite remarkable, and it is. But also remarkable is the fact that in the face of the pandemic, the Government has been able to move within a few weeks to find accommodation for a huge number of people who had previously been sleeping rough, something that had been regarded up until then as an intractable problem which would take years to sort out – an irony pointed out on the news a few evenings ago by someone who works with the homeless.

I’m reminded of the old saying “If you’re not a socialist when you are twenty, you have no heart; but if you’re not a capitalist by forty, you have no head.”<sup>2</sup>

My own experience has perhaps been something of the opposite. At twenty I was at university, studying economics at the time that monetarism was coming into full flight. At twenty my economics was decidedly free-market capitalist. But over the years the experience of life – and particularly coming to a greater awareness and understanding of the lives of others – has taught me much greater humanity and compassion than my former ideologically “pure” free-market economics would have allowed.

I’m not suggesting that the Bible advocates one particular economic system over another: if we think about it we should recognise that human history demonstrates the weaknesses and fallenness of both capitalism and communism in equal measure. But we do need to recognise that, along with every other sphere of human activity, our economic choices should reflect our allegiance to Jesus Christ our Lord.

---

<sup>2</sup> The saying appears in a wide variety of forms, and has an interesting pedigree. See <https://www.quora.com/To-whom-is-this-quote-attributed-to-If-You-Are-Not-a-Liberal-at-25-You-Have-No-Heart-If-You-Are-Not-a-Conservative-at-35-You-Have-No-Brain>

And that is exactly why the sharing wealth in common was a feature of the early Church. The death and resurrection of Jesus demonstrated to his followers that he is Messiah and Lord, and that in this role he represented his people, Israel, and fulfilled the purpose for which his people had been called by God. Given this fulfilment, the old markers of Israel as a people no longer mattered – one of these markers was their land, the land God had promised them. Land ownership and retention within families had been vitally important before; after the resurrection however land could (and ought!) be disposed in the interests of serving the Lord and his new people, the Church.

I recently read the following:

Perhaps no other realm of the commons<sup>3</sup> so challenges what you claim to believe than economics. Economics functions as a mirror, where the truth of your faith is reflected back. The spreadsheet is a theological statement, reflecting any incongruence between what you say you believe and how you steward your resources. This reality can be painful. ...

At a core level economics has to do with basic exchange, receiving and giving. ... The connection between your treasure and your heart is not simply about how you give; it's also about how you earn, which means there is nothing that has to do with money that doesn't have to do with your heart.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the scarcity mindset of our economic system, and a marketing approach that amplifies our sense of need and want, the writer encourages an “abundant community” perspective:

First, we see the abundance that we have – individually, as neighbours and in this place of ours.

Second, we know that the power of what we have grows from creating new connections and relationships among and between what we have.

---

<sup>3</sup> The writer uses the term “the commons” to refer to “all we share”, all the dimensions of life for which everyone in your neighbourhood shares a common concern.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight J Friesen, *The New Parish*, pp.97, 99.

Third, we know that these connections are no accident. They happen when we individually or collectively act to make the connections – they don't just happen by themselves.<sup>5</sup>

If you are feeling uncomfortable right now, reading all this, please take some time to ask God what he is saying to you. Perhaps you need to ask how your attitudes to wealth and possessions might be better submitted to the purposes of God? Perhaps you need to ask what self-giving love for the people of God and for the community might look like for you?

Perhaps there are hard choices to make in this, and there may therefore be loss and discomfort involved. But as the apostle Peter writes,

If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ... For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Peter 2:20b-21, 25)

And there we find that comforting shepherd image again.

While there is definitely general truth to these words of Peter, if we take the trouble to read the passage in its context we'll find that they were addressed to a particular group of people, and it is here that we may be comforted again:

Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. (1 Peter 2:18-19)

Does the Bible affirm slavery? In centuries past there were certainly people who employed the Bible to justify the practice of slavery. Or we may ask, if the Bible doesn't affirm slavery as such, why doesn't it condemn it?

There is a great deal that could be written on the topic, but for today I just want to make one key point. While Peter simply takes the existence of slavery as a given in the society in

---

<sup>5</sup> *The New Parish*, p.99, citing John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community*, p.1

which he lives, what is remarkable in this passage is that Peter addresses slaves as fellow believers, as *brothers and sisters in Christ*. In fact, he elevates slaves because he equates the suffering that they may undergo with the suffering endured by his Lord, Jesus Christ. In the culture of the time, a great deal of life revolved around the a very distinct pecking order, who could and couldn't move up the order, and systems of patronage and so forth that might be used to bring about change to someone's standing. Slaves were not on the same level as kings, but Peter puts Christian slaves who submit themselves to their masters on the same level as his King Jesus. That's a revolution! And it's a revolution that results from the work of Jesus, his suffering, death, and resurrection.<sup>6</sup>

Take a moment to reflect on how you regard others. Are there any sorts of people that you regard as lesser than you (whatever the basis for the distinction)? How do you think Jesus regards them, and how he regards you? What is God saying to you?

The thing is, the resurrection affects everything including our day-to-day living. Our day-to-day living – that is, the choices we make in every sphere of life – betrays our ultimate loyalties. And in the light of Jesus' ministry, death, resurrection and ascension we have come to know that he is the world's true King and is thus owed our full allegiance.

Hidden away in the comfort of Jesus' shepherd metaphors in John 10 there is the ultimate challenge. The metaphor of shepherd was used to describe the model king, perhaps drawing on memory of King David, the shepherd boy who become the king after God's own heart.(1 Samuel 13:14). In Ezekiel 34 we find an extended word from God evaluating the leaders of Israel in terms of their shepherding qualities. In John 10, Jesus' application of these shepherd images to himself afflicts the comforted, because it is an implicit claim to be Israel's true King. Those who are among the ruling elite of the time are therefore vulnerable: they are the thieves and imposters. Those who side with the ruling elite are also vulnerable – not least to the elite's predation and oppression. To put it another way, who it

---

<sup>6</sup> I owe this insight to N T Wright, whose magisterial *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* opens with an extended discussion of Paul's letter to Philemon about the runaway slave Onesimus. The essential point is that Paul had to rethink his understanding of humankind (as well as of God) in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul writes a letter which is completely counter-cultural in its time: writing to Philemon his protegee as an equal, a brother in Christ, on behalf of Onesimus so that Philemon might regard Onesimus, his slave, as his equal and brother in Christ too.

is we allow to be our shepherds is a choice with life-altering consequences. It may not be people that we place in this role: it can also be things, or expectations, or systems. Have you ever pondered what someone has become as you see the effects of the system on their choices over years? (As a notable example, I am fascinated by the effects of professionalism on sport. Professional sport needs advertising dollars, and the advertisers need celebrities and heroes, thus putting unprepared young sportsmen and women on pedestals for which they are ill-suited – they become “role models” – and then viciously cutting them down when they fail to be the role models they were never equipped to be.)

Acts 2 has a particular poignancy today, as it lists marks of the early church which are not available to us to enjoy at present – gathering together to “break bread” etc. But while we are prevented from doing these things, let us take the opportunity to examine the other qualities of our life together. It is clear from Acts that the early church was working out the implications of the resurrection in all the common things of life: the pandemic restrictions present an opportunity for us to think again about what we regard as common life, and to think of what we might hold in common or use for the common good. The Acts 2 church lived as a *family*. It involved a turning of the world’s values upside-down; it was an expression of the life of the age to come. And it originated in the work of Jesus, who turned the world’s values upside-down by becoming King through an act of self-giving love and sacrifice.

Today, if you count yourself comfortable, perhaps you are being asked to reflect on the source and reasons for that comfort, and check where your ultimate allegiance lies. Today, if you are among the afflicted, draw comfort from the Good Shepherd who is at work to set the world to rights and to join heaven and earth together in the age to come.