



Homily for the 4th Sunday of Easter

Cardiff Cathedral

Sunday 25th April 2021

Archbishop George Stack

In the year 2000 the National Gallery in London put on an exhibition to mark the new Millennium. It was called "Seeing Salvation". The subtitle was "The Image of Christ down the ages". It showed how artists have represented Jesus in paintings, statues, wood or in metal over the last 2000 years. The National Gallery was overwhelmed with the crowds that came to see the exhibition. They had no idea it would be so popular.

The first part of the exhibition told visitors that for the first three hundred years of the life of the Church, Christians did not dare make representations of Jesus. Partly out of reverence, but more significantly for fear of persecution. They used coded signs on doors and walls which would convey the message to fellow Christians but not to outsiders. So the Chi Rho of the Greek alphabet symbolising the first two letters of the name Christ. And the sign of the fish, Ichthys, reminding them of the name Jesus. They used pre-Christian Greek wall paintings and statues also to remind them of their Lord and Master. The most famous of these is a statue of a young boy with a sheep on his shoulders. The name of the statue is "The Shepherd of Hermes" and very beautiful it is too.

Living in an agricultural world, Jesus often used images of the things of nature in his parables and descriptions of himself. "*I am the Good Shepherd*" is one of the seven "I am" sayings of

Jesus in the Gospel of John. The Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the Resurrection, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Vine, the Gate of the Sheepfold, the Good Shepherd. Each one describing a different aspect of the life and love, the ministry and teaching and, ultimately, the sacrificial offering Jesus makes of Himself for the salvation of the world. He is not only the shepherd but also the Lamb of Sacrifice.

Those who hear him would know exactly what he meant. The precarious, dangerous life of both shepherd and sheep had none of the benefits of modern agriculture. Apart from natural compassion for animals, to lose a sheep was a hard economic reality. There was no living wage or furloughing of staff in those days! The shepherd in Galilee had to put his own life on the line in protecting the sheep from wolves and hyenas and, according to King David, lions as well. All of this would be in the minds of the people who heard Jesus say *“I am the Good Shepherd”*.

Despite that reality, in our own day we may well have an idealised, romantic and idyllic view of sheep and shepherds and green pastures and leaping lambs. The recent series of programs on television about the Yorkshire Farm should surely change our minds on that! But the shepherding Jesus offers is one of courage and faithfulness to the weakest of all. He is not afraid to confront his opponents who steal and

exploit the dignity of the poor and the lowly as we hear throughout his public ministry. He is prepared to stand up to those “sheep in wolves clothing” who would lead the innocent astray. These are the things that led him to his death on the cross. The life of this Good Shepherd is less important than the lives of the sheep entrusted to his care.

It is little wonder that the Holy Father chooses this Good Shepherd Sunday as a Day of Prayer for Vocations to the Priesthood and Consecrated Life. At his first Mass of Chrism in 2013, Pope Francis wrote to all the priests of the world and said *“Be shepherds with the smell of the sheep”*. Immerse yourselves in the lives and well-being of your people. Hear their stories. Heal their pain. Challenge their direction. Support them in their weakness. Guide them when they go astray. Pray for them and with them and nourish them at the table of God’s Word and the table of the Sacrament and Sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

St. Peter puts it equally strongly in his first epistle, telling us priests *“Be the shepherds of the flock of God that is entrusted to you: Watch over it, not simply as a duty, but gladly because God wants it; Not for sordid money, but because you are eager to do it. Never be a dictator over any group put in your charge, but be an example that the whole flock can*

follow. When the chief shepherd appears, you will be given the crown of unfading glory". (1Peter 5:2).

Good Shepherd, now your flock has need of you,
One finds the fold and ninety nine are lost
Out in the darkness and the icy dew,
And no one knows how long this night will last.
Restore us; call us back to you by name,
And by your life laid down, redeem our shame.

(Malcolm Guite)
