

A Royal Priesthood

(Acts 7:55-60, 1 Peter 2:2-10, John 14:8-18)

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Last week's scripture readings and this week's give us completely different understandings of what it means to be a human being and a follower of Jesus, both of which are true! You may recall that last week was Good Shepherd Sunday. On that day, we were reminded that we who are the followers of Jesus are his "sheep".

An Unflattering Portrayal

You know that this is not a flattering comparison. Sheep are fearful creatures, quick to succumb to a herd mentality and to flee at the slightest hint of danger. I don't know enough about their actual behavior to know how they relate to their shepherds. But Jesus describes them as trusting the voice they are familiar with, the voice of the one who has demonstrated that he cares for them.

One thing I do know is that real life shepherding is not as gentle as our thoughts about the kindness and tenderness of Jesus might lead us to believe. There is also a reason why Psalm 23 mentions a "rod and staff." In the real world, tending sheep involves some rough handling with a whack of the rod here and a shove with a boot there. And if you were to treat humans this way, you could say that you were following the

principle that a whack on the hand is the best way to stop a child from touching a hot stove.

I know that some of you who grew up “old school” in the “spare the rod, spoil the child” days of child rearing will agree that there is value in a good spanking to keep kids from engaging in bad behavior. I confess that I am too “new” school for that. For better or worse I have tried to stay away from spanking.

In any case, the picture of ourselves that we get, when allow ourselves to be labelled as “sheep” is not flattering. It is as though we are forever little “children”, who are timid in the face of danger and incapable of taking care of ourselves. That we need an authority figure who will run our lives for us and tell us what to do and where we can go and who will apply the rod, when necessary to keep us in line. Is that really who we are and is that really the kind of Master that we have in Jesus? It seems rather controlling.

A Truthful Portrayal

Unfortunately, I think that this picture of who we are is partly accurate. If we are honest, there is a part of us that is very insecure and sheeplike. We want to blend into a larger group for security and we do need some kind of trustworthy authority that will provide guidance for

our lives, set the right boundaries for us and who will care for us. And this doesn't end with childhood.

A Rejected Self-Understanding

I have often wondered why there are so few men in church these days. And I wonder whether it is because they are reacting to this way of thinking about the church and are unwilling to accept being defined as sheep. They may tell themselves, I am not a child. I am not timid and frightened. I am an adult who is not afraid of facing the dangers that are out there and I am capable of making my own decisions and setting my own limits. I don't need anyone or anything to protect me or watch over me or tell me what to do.

This seems to me a fairly reasonable view to take. It expresses the strong strain of independence, freedom and self-reliance that has played such an important role in shaping the American character. "Live free or die" "Don't tread on Me", the Spirit of the Pioneer.

But I also think that there are some good responses to this concern in scripture. One is the importance of recognizing that the confidence that we have in our own courage and good judgement needs to be tempered by an honest admission that we are all, to some extent

motivated by our fears and guided by false shepherds. I doubt that many of us are really as brave and omniscient as we imagine ourselves to be.

A second response is the one I want to elaborate on. And that is this. The label “sheep” is only one of the ways the New Testament defines us. That is clear from today’s readings, which paint a very different picture of who we are as human beings and as followers of Jesus. Because today scripture is telling us that we are in fact, a “Royal Priesthood.” And if this is true, then it must be that we are both sheep and royalty at the same time. And this gives us a much wiser and fuller understanding of who we really are.

I would say that, in today’s reading, we are introduced to a much more “grown up” understanding of who we are that, at the same time, does not erase the fact that there is a child within each of us that still has the ongoing need for a shepherd.

I am leaving this to you

Today’s Gospel reading helps us to understand how these two definitions of who we are come to be, by taking us through the transition we must all take in growing up. It begins with the acknowledgment of a coming separation. Jesus tells his followers that

he is leaving them, but that he will always be with them; that they can talk to him, even when he is no longer physically present. And he goes on to paint a bold and bright future for them, telling them that when they live in him and he lives in them, God will do whatever they ask in his name.

I'm sure that part of the reason this section is so emotionally powerful, is because it reminds us of the separation from childhood innocence that we all have to face, when our own parents or guardians, the people we have looked up to and trusted and listened to, in one way or another, begin their goodbyes and hand the baton to us, before entering into the next phase of their journey. Jesus is passing the baton to his followers in anticipation of that moment when he will no longer be present to run the show.

What those people who have modelled Christ in our own lives doing, is passing the baton to us in the best way they know how. It is a kind of anointing or Christening. They are taking the crown from their own heads and putting it on ours; signalling that we now much more than just the sheep of his fold. We are now also participating in the role of shepherd, guardian, caretaker or servant leader, who's role it is to act decisively for the well-being of the flock. And we are to do so in accordance with the power and authority of the Christ who lives within

us. To put a more exalted label on who we are, we can be bold to say that we are members of a “royal priesthood”.

And such an exalted terms is appropriate because, what has been bestowed on us is an awesome freedom and power. Christ himself tells us that “whatever we ask for in his name will be done for us.” It is both a high privilege and a daunting responsibility. We are monarchs within the realms in which we live, with the freedom and the awesome power to create or to destroy, to inflict harm or channel the good life to all who dwell within the realm we serve.

The Coronation of King Charles

It's a wonderful coincidence that this reading coincides with the crowning of King Charles this weekend, because it gives us a chance to see more deeply into what being given the title “Royal Priest” says about who we are and who we are to be. As Charles assumes the throne of the British Commonwealth, it is instructive for us to consider that all of the exaltation, all the privileges and responsibilities that go with his assumption of the royal title, have a parallel in our own lives.

And that coronation involves the challenge of being faithful to the way of Christ in word and deed, even if it leads to being persecuted, as we see in our first reading, with the example of Stephen, who is stoned to

death by a crowd. Charles and his mother the late Queen Elizabeth both figures in the Church of England, were groomed also to accept personal sacrifice as a central feature of their reigns, by devoting themselves to the wellbeing of their people. Queen Elizabeth sought to do so in the best way she could in her time and Charles will do it differently, presumably with the same dedication to service.

Think how completely opposite to sheep-like these expectations are. The coronation of Charles signals to the world that he has been signaled out and anointed to lead by example and that expectations have been placed on him from which he cannot possibly hide. He cannot behave like a sheep and find safety by blending into the herd. And yet, despite all the pomp and circumstance, he too is no more than a sheep of the flock.

It does seem to me that there are stages in our growth as Christians. That we start like sheep, with a tremendous need for safety and a reassuring voice. We begin with what 1st Peter calls “spiritual milk”: with an emphasize on the divine providence, comfort and protection that we ourselves receive as sheep in the fold of the Good Shepherd.

But as we grow in our identification with the Spirit of Christ, he leads us more and more into participating in his role as shepherd, as servant

leader and as “Royal Priest.” We find ourselves challenged to be ever more courageous and up front in taking on the role of ensuring the well-being of those who are under our care.

And so these two seemingly opposite understandings of who we are, are not in contradiction. They exist together within us and both are essential to who we are and who we are called to be. The knowledge that we are sheep, reminds us of our very real fears and frailties as human beings. At the same time, our being anointed to royalty sets us apart to lead with boldness out of the authority of the Christ who lives in us. And the green pastures, still waters and safety that our Good Shepherd provides, gives us a place of inner peace from which we can withstand the onslaught of the enraged mob, and provides the vision of a truly blessed future toward which we can strive.

Closing

What I find most powerful about the different scriptural understandings of who we are is, that they reveal to us that none of us are only one thing. We are all a mixed bag. But scripture also makes a point of showing us that the great things that have been done have always been done through people who are a mixed bag, like you and me.

Doing good requires the humility to face unflattering truths about ourselves, and at the same time, the courage to step up and accept that we are an exalted royalty and priesthood to whom great power and authority has been given and in whom great hopes have been placed. So, “God save King Charles and God Save the Kings and Queens of the Montague Congregational Church in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts!”