

HOMILY – GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY - 7 MAY 2017

In today's Gospel from John, Jesus makes it apparent, in other words, he brings to light, that He is the Good Shepherd, that is sent by the Father, to lead the faithful to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus talks in metaphors. He communicates about the Kingdom of God, in words and phrases, using words such as shepherd, sheep and sheepfold. Why? Because the Jews are a people used to caring for sheep and goats. Their ancient fathers, going back to Abraham and Moses and David, cared for the sheep and goats. The Tribes of Israel were nomadic peoples. If they said someone was not a caring shepherd, they would know immediately what that meant. Just as today we would talk about a football manager not having a passion for the club or a shop manager not having a caring heart for his staff, or a husband or wife, who is no longer committed to the marriage.

In all these cases, you have a leader and you have those who follow. Jesus Christ, Son of God, is brought into the world as saviour, to lead the faithful to the Kingdom of Heaven. He shepherds or guides us on the right path, seeking us to know him and love him, warning of dangers from evil, feeding us with the food of life, Holy Communion and like any good shepherd, being willing to sacrifice his own life for the 'sheep' of his flock. He takes us to drink deeply from the well of spiritual waters, which is our prayer life and initiates the Universal Church, which is the 'flock', the assembly of the faithful.

I am sure you have heard of Ecclesmachan, not far from Uphall. The origin of this word is Latin, 'ecclesia Machan'. The Latin word 'ecclesia' meaning church/assembly, the gathering of the faithful. So the parish is where we assemble to share in the Mass in the community. The word 'parish' has a sheep connection with 'pasture or field' and another term for the priest is 'pastor or shepherd'.

The Bishop himself, as successor of the Apostles, is a co-shepherd of Christ and from ancient times, carries a shepherd's crook, as a sign that he is there to guide his Diocese, his many parishes, to the Kingdom of God, with the delegated assistance of the pastors, the parish priests.

The truth we come to realise in faith, is that we need to be guided by God, otherwise we lose our way. That is why Jesus says, in today's Gospel, "The sheep follow because they know his voice, they never follow a stranger but run away from him".

But, is that the case with you and I? Do we listen to other voices that are not from Christ? Am I easily led astray? As St Peter says, in the second reading, "You had gone astray like sheep but now you have come back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls".

The truth is, many of us are vulnerable to strange voices or messages that are not from God. Every day, we are influenced by advertising, by self-importance, by corrupt or illicit images of life, by those who want to influence our lives, not for the better but for our control and subjugation, in other words, propaganda, seeking to steal our loyalty as well as our wealth.

Jesus, on the other hand, with the faithful assistance of co-shepherds, good shepherds, seeks only our freedom and salvation.

As Pope John Paul II said, "It is not more priests we need but good priests, faithful priests, to lead the Church into the Kingdom of Heaven". To be faithful shepherds, steering the Church closer to Christ, the Eternal Shepherd.

