

Homily 16th Sunday Ordinary Time 2024

The old Irish joke tells the story of Delaney, a bit of a womaniser. His two friends Murphy and O'Toole were constantly at him in the pub to go to Confession and change his ways. Reluctantly, Delaney agreed and on Saturday morning, accompanied by his two friends, went to church. He waited in line till it was his turn for Confession. Fr Kelly, taken aback by his sins asked, 'Was it Maureen Kelly? Kathleen O'Brien? Mary O'Sullivan? 'I'm not saying who it was Father.', replied Delaney and stormed out of the confessional without receiving Absolution. Immediately, Murphy and O'Toole pursued him. 'Did you get Absolution Delaney?', they pressed. 'No!' replied Delaney 'but Fr Kelly did give me a couple of good steers.'

For all his faults Fr Kelly was indeed a shepherd who 'had the smell of his sheep' and knew his flock well. Jeremiah in today's First Reading warns the shepherds of Israel, 'Doom for the shepherds who allow the flock of my pasture to be destroyed and scattered – it is the Lord who speaks! This, therefore, is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says about the shepherds in charge of my people: You have let my flock be scattered and go wandering and have not taken care of them.

A shepherd at the time of Jesus would have a flock for life. He knew each by name as they were normally used not to eat but for their wool. The shepherd would go ahead of the sheep in order to meet potential danger first, such was his love for his flock. Armed with a club he would ward off preying wolves. At night he would act as the gate of the sheepfold by sleeping across the open pen and in the morning he would, one by one, check the condition of each animal using his crook as a barrier. His sling and pouch of rounded stones served him as a sheepdog serves a modern day shepherd. Working with other shepherds he would leave his 99 safe sheep and go after the 'lost one' and rejoice with his friends when he returned with the stray.

Jesus in today's Gospel, after spending some time in a 'lonely place' in prayer is disappointed and dismayed as he saw, as Jeremiah did, how the people were abandoned by their religious leaders, the shepherds. '...and he took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he set himself to teach them at some length.' Caught up in laws and petty rules, administration and empty observances the religious leaders of The Chosen People had forgotten the real focus of their shepherding, the people and so Jesus felt sorry for them and acted to right the wrong giving them true and authoritative teaching.

St Paul accordingly in today's Second Reading states that Jesus 'is the peace between us, actually destroying in his own person the hostility caused by the rules and decrees of the Law'. It is in other words Jesus, the Good and True Shepherd, we are called to follow not the 'hired man' who does not know his sheep and is preoccupied by things other than his flock.

Pope Francis urges The Church's priests to 'smell their sheep', to know each by name, to be aware of their circumstances both spiritually and otherwise, to keep up to date with their lives by regular chats, to visit those who are sick, to search out those who have gone astray, to make pastoral visits to support those in challenging circumstances, to know those most vulnerable and 'walk side by side' with them as they face the dangers of living. In short to eat, sleep and breathe their flock and have their good at heart. Francis wishes his priests to be Bearers of The Good News of The Gospel, celebrating The Sacraments with their flocks, lifting heavy burdens from their often already overlaid shoulders and building up Christian Communities which are sacraments of Christ himself.

What a beautiful vocation and what a privilege to be called by Jesus to be such a shepherd.