

## St Mary's Abbey, Nuneaton, Confirmation Mass

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time - 18 July 2021

### Gospel

St Mark 6.30 – 34

<sup>30</sup>The apostles returned to Jesus and told Him all that they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup>And He said to them, 'Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. <sup>32</sup>And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves.

<sup>33</sup>Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.

<sup>34</sup>When He went ashore He saw a great crowd, and He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And He began to teach them many things.

### Homily

Dear brothers and sisters, dear candidates, today the Church's thoughts are taken once again to one of the strongest themes of the scriptures – that God is himself the shepherd of humanity. It is an image of life, of protection, of intimacy, and of guidance to good pastures where we can be nourished and rest. He doesn't want us to be vulnerable, separated from others, lost or perishing, but instead to reach, together, the destination of our journey with Him which is the fullness of life itself.

Today's gospel spotlights just one particular facet of this ever-present biblical image. Jesus presents himself as the shepherd not of one lost sheep, but of a whole *lost flock* – the lost flock of the House of Israel. We're in one of the many crowd scenes in the gospel, where Jesus is often moved and often performs a miracle, and indeed this passage immediately precedes the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus is *captivated* by the sudden appearance of the crowd; and (St Mark tells us) 'He had compassion on them, *because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*' (v.34) This biblical phrase 'sheep without a shepherd' was much more than a quaint sweetie-box image for an directionless group of people (see *Num 27.12; Ez 34.5*). It conjures up the whole history and destiny of ancient Israel. God was shepherd of His people; in the face of the many fragmenting pressures of Israel's history he kept the various tribes as one flock. It was He Who led them forward, physically, morally, spiritually. But God also had deputies – religious and political leaders who shared the responsibility. They often failed. And the implication is that Jesus's heart goes out to them. He'd been heading for a place of retreat, but He had been pursued by hungry, excited, leaderless crowd of God's own people. What God feels in times when the leaders of His people had simply failed to give guidance and to keep the flock together in the face of history, *Jesus himself felt now*. He is now in God's place; obliged by His own compassion (see *Lk 19.10*) to bring these people back to safety through the Father's mercy, teaching and healing.

The instinct of our own age – and it is in itself a good instinct – has been to see in Jesus a friend of mankind, a man who understood and wherever possible helped people in their sufferings. That image of Christ has motivated many of the strongest currents of service, of witness and social engagement in the contemporary Church; and it is a *powerful* witness, which has inspired many in wider society and the international community. Rightly our hearts go out to people in their distress and need, at home and overseas; we want to see real justice and equity.

But Jesus is not just a figure of vast charity with a boundless heart, and a seemingly endless readiness to meet people at the lowest point of their need and help them up. Christ's heart is not simply large and strong and passionate, wanting to eradicate the evils that beset human beings. The heart of Jesus the Good Shepherd – that is the Sacred Heart of God – is for ever a *heart pierced* on the cross; and He learned wisdom at the knee of a mother whose soul was *also* pierced by the Love for the world that had embodied itself in her son. This sign should make us think a little deeper than we are used to about how Jesus reacts to the needs of lost humanity.

Jesus is no social reformer. He certainly addresses the causes of individual pain and need; but His aim there is to build on faith, not primarily to lessen or remove suffering. But He doesn't propose a programme of eradicating injustices, instituting rights, or redistributing wealth toward to the poor. For Jesus the problem is both *different* and *deeper*, and therefore the solution He sees is both more *personal* and *profound*.

Suffering is not just a condition to be alleviated, or burden to be lifted, but a door to be entered, and an invitation to be embraced. The roots of suffering go *deep* into what it means to be human; and our experience of suffering is not just on the surface of our lives. Our suffering is inseparable from our experience of sin and our distance from God, and the tears it causes cannot simply be wiped away. Jesus understood all this. And He also knew that suffering can be a doorway in the soul that may lead us to God. That is why He confidently tells us that we must take up our cross and follow him. It is a way of suffering that can only be understood by carrying it; that can only be lightened by sharing it.

When we hear the words 'He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd' we come *nearer to Christ's understanding* when realise that Christ did not seek to avoid or remove pain as *we* always want to. He didn't try to insulate us, or fight to eliminate it. He received it into His pierced heart and became com-*passionate*: a fellow sufferer. And that is how divine love becomes triumphant in us because it reveals the sacred and universal heart of God the shepherd to us, and increases faith. In order to carry out this work of radical healing Jesus the 'God-Shepherd' had to become a lamb, the 'God-Lamb, who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1.29). I firmly believe that the Church fails in its impact among our contemporaries, because we are too quick simply to want to remove people's suffering rather than to share it and transform it.

One very last thought. We shall always struggle, and we shall ultimately be defeated, if we think that suffering, whether our own or other people's, is only a burden to be lifted or a wrong to be righted. But we shall be *even further* burdened and defeated if we try to enter into the suffering of others with only the resources of our *own* love. But we are nowhere asked to do this on our own! Quite the opposite. We are here today to offer ourselves in the Eucharist in union with Christ, and ask our Father to *feed* us with Christ's body and blood, *fill* us with His Spirit, and *send* us out to share and enter into the sufferings of others – that is to love others with *His* love. *Joined to Him*, we thus literally become instruments of His love, like a pencil in His hands; loving with *His* heart; guarding, guiding and loving others with *His* compassion and confidence.

## Prayer

All-powerful, eternal God, may our eyes see and our hearts have compassion, on all those who need your love. May what we gain through friendship with you make us, through

every suffering, truly free as children of God, and capable of spreading in this world the light of your purity and goodness. Amen.