

Ezekiel 34: 11-16

The Israelites in the slave labour camps outside Babylon knew about fault and responsibility. In the passage just before this they hear from Ezekiel whom to blame for their exile; it is the bad shepherds, their failed leaders. In the following passage they are told that their desperate plight is also their own fault. There are bad sheep as well as bad shepherds.

But in this passage, sandwiched between bad shepherds and bad sheep, it is God who says that He Himself will act. He seeks, he rescues, he feeds, he cares for the weak, but the fat and strong, who can only have become so by evil means, are to be destroyed. We are the sheep, and our Shepherd is God himself. In that sentence is all our hope, in that sentence, that God is our shepherd, is our certainty that the Church will live through all its struggles and vicissitudes, for the Good Shepherd finds, cares, judges, but restores. Yet in our confidence, we must not forget the warnings. It is tempting, on an occasion like this, to look back. But the words of the prophecy compel us to look forward.

We cannot be bad shepherds, for they are rejected. When we fight among ourselves, as Christians, when we lose the obligation of sharing mercy and forgiveness, we not only disobey the explicit prayer and command of Our Lord, but also we become shepherds who devour the sheep. The church becomes a circus for gladiatorial combat, in which the losers are shown no mercy. Augustine, commenting on Psalm 32, says of the Donatists, "Let us grieve for them, my friends, as though they were our own brothers and sisters. For that is what they are, whether they like it or not." The wonderful power of the Year of Mercy is in its appeal to the merciful heart of God, in which we must be merciful to each other.

We cannot be bad shepherds, but neither can we be bad sheep, by becoming inward looking, and turning our backs on the Saviour who has gone before us to the poor, to the migrant, to the slave, to the refugee. The Good Shepherd is in the world seeking his people. We find the fullness of life when we seek with him. Last Christmas, in a carol service in the chapel at Lambeth Palace, we heard the witness, the testimony of a young, trafficked slave sex worker who had been found by Christians, who had gone into the brothel where she had to work, and through them she found the love of the Good Shepherd. In that chapel we wept as we heard of hope renewed and a journey of healing begun.

While we rejoice that our Good Shepherd is the one who rescues, we also know that we - each of us, all of us, every Christian - is called to be his feet and hands and mouth. We are the mouth that calls, the hands that pick up, the feet that cross any obstacle to find the lost sheep and bring it home.

And so my prayer, as we look forward, is that as God's family we may always be those who look out into a world that wanders like sheep without a shepherd, where the weak, the unborn, the trafficked, the dying, those with disabilities are treated not as humans but as inconveniences. And not only do we look, but we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd calling and we respond: "Here we are, send us".

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