

Sunday Homily

4th SUNDAY OF EASTER

3 MAY 2020

YEAR A

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

John 10:10

Illustration

Significant numbers of the working population in the UK are migrant workers. Many come from former Eastern bloc countries like Poland and they come to seek better conditions and a more realistic rate of pay. They take on jobs which are difficult to fill, because those jobs are dirty, cold and sometimes dangerous, as the scandal of the cockle pickers who drowned while working in unsafe conditions in Morecambe Bay in 2004 showed. And migrant workers are sometimes abused, receiving a very low rate of pay from which a large percentage is taken to pay for accommodation, even though that accommodation may be in appalling conditions.

Since they have no claim on any UK support system, it is little wonder that migrant workers occasionally resort to theft or break out into fights. Migrant workers have a bad press and are often despised and ostracised by UK residents.

Gospel Teaching

In first-century Palestine, shepherds had just such a press, especially if they were hired hands. Flocks were only allowed to be kept in the wilderness, since any sheep that was found between Jerusalem and Bethlehem was considered to be a sacrificial victim. So shepherds spent their lives in the wilderness scratching for food for their sheep and facing the danger of wild beasts.

Consequently, those who were poorly paid hired hands tended to lead their flocks onto other people's land, and had a reputation for pilfering. Because they often worked for months at a time without supervision, they were frequently accused of stealing from the flock. The pious were warned not to buy wool, milk, or kids from shepherds, on the assumption that it was stolen property. Shepherds were not allowed to participate in the judicial system, not even as witnesses. Polite society considered that there was no more disreputable occupation than that of a shepherd; and Philo, a Jewish philosopher of the day, wrote about shepherds, "Such pursuits are held mean and inglorious." So when we call Jesus "the Good Shepherd", we may be saying something much more revolutionary than we realise.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus refers to himself as something that sounds even lowlier than a shepherd: the door of the sheepfold. But in the ancient Middle East the door to the sheepfold was provided by the shepherd himself, who would lie across the open entrance at night in order to keep the sheep in and wild beasts out. This entrance was the only legitimate way into the sheepfold, since any other entry involved climbing over the wall, a route taken by thieves.

Having thus referred to himself as a caring shepherd and therefore the one whom the sheep rightly trust to keep them safe and lead them to good pasture, Jesus tosses a final insult towards the religious leaders of the day. He implies that they are nothing more than hired hands, by asserting that all who came before him were thieves and bandits caring nothing for the sheep. Therefore, says Jesus, the sheep failed to listen to these religious leaders. But Jesus affirms that the sheep instantly recognise him, hear his voice and identify him as their shepherd.

Application

By acting as the gatekeeper, Jesus both encourages his sheep into the sheepfold when necessary, but also leads them out to roam freely in the pasture. If the Church is the sheepfold, then perhaps we need to remember that its purpose is as a shelter to which we return to rest and recover. Our shepherd, Jesus, cares for us and keeps us safe from harm. But most of the time, he encourages us out into the world beyond, where we are to roam freely. And it is interesting that the sheep are mostly nourished not in the fold, but outside the fold. The sheep need to go out to find their own sustenance and, since the pasture outside the sheepfold is a wilderness, that may not be an easy task.

So our place is to rest and relax here in church, knowing that we are kept safe by Jesus, but then to go out into the world. Fortunately, we have a good shepherd. Jesus will guide us out to the places where we need to be and will gather us back into the fold, keeping us safe. If we hear his voice and go out and come back in through him, we will find our nourishment in the most unexpected places. And when that happens, then all of us, migrant workers included, begin to experience life as God intended.