

Reflection: “Of Shepherds and Sheeple” Easter 4, May 3, 2009

What words come to mind when you hear the word “Sheep”?

Maverick MP Garth Turner recently published a book called, “Sheeple: Caucus Confidential in Stephen Harper’s Ottawa.” I heard on interview with him on CBC the other day, and that word “sheeple” stuck in my mind. I found this handy little definition on-line from the *Urban Dictionary*: the term’s been around since the 1950s, and it’s used to refer to people who follow blindly, fail to question, and have a flock mentality. In Turner’s view, “sheeple” refers to people who act like sheep – who vote the party line, don’t ask questions, believe everything they’re told, don’t stand up for themselves or, in the case of MPs, don’t stand up for their constituents. It’s an interesting word to think about, in the run-up to a provincial election. And it’s an interesting word to think about, given our readings for this morning.

Taking a cue from Biblical imagery, Protestant clergy have often been referred to as “pastors”, and their congregations as “flocks”. We refer to care for the spiritual wellbeing of our congregants as “pastoral care”. Pastor means “shepherd”, or more literally, “feeder”. All of this conjures up images of a peaceful flock grazing in green fields under the eyes of a benevolent shepherd. Is that your image of the church? Personally, I’ve never particularly liked the title “pastor”, precisely because of this imagery of shepherd and flock. If anyone is the shepherd of this congregation, it’s the Holy Spirit, not me; and frankly, I would be deeply disappointed in a congregation that behaved like sheep, at least in relationship to anything that I proposed!

One of my favourite fantasy novelists has comments on religious ideas sprinkled here and there in her novels. In “The Fire Rose”, Mercedes Lackey has a cynical philosopher-magician say to his young protégé, as they pass a church with a beautiful stained glass window of the Good Shepherd, “People are sheep, boy. ...I have to laugh whenever I see the sheep talking about Jesus as ‘The Good Shepherd’ without thinking about it. What does the shepherd do?” “Protect the sheep,” replies his young apprentice. “And why?” asks the Philosopher. “So he can take their wool twice a year; take their milk if he’s so inclined, and butcher lamb and ewe alike when the flock is big enough that he can afford some meat out of it....Barnes keeps asking me if the correct translation of that passage in the Bible ‘feed my sheep’, shouldn’t read ‘fleece my sheep’.” These cynical words are not true of Jesus, but they are all too true of some who have claimed to lead in his name. In “Exile’s Honour”, a Weaponsmaster who is an exile from a country ruled by corrupt priests (not unlike the religious extremists of our day), has a conversation with another priest in his new country. This young priest says he believes the corruption of the clergy started with the congregation. They wanted easy answers, not difficult questions and a life-long process of growing in faith – and slowly the clergy became addicted to the power that comes with giving people what they want, not what they need or what the faith demands.

All of this says some things to me about leadership and discipleship – about shepherd and sheep. It implies for me that all of us are responsible for the outcome of our journey together. If a congregation is made up of *sheeple* instead of people who use their minds and hearts to discern God's will, that congregation is responsible if they allow themselves to be led astray. If a congregation is served by a minister who preys on his or her flock, that minister *must* and will be held accountable by the church courts, and by a higher court yet. There are good shepherds, and bad shepherds, and there are congregations that are more like sheep than people, and congregations that, thankfully, aren't much like sheep at all. Probably, most pastoral relationships are somewhere in the middle spectrum. I think every person who has ever exercised leadership in any congregation has been tempted to give people what they want, not what they need or what faith demands; and everyone who has ever been a pew-sitter or a follower has been tempted to "go along to get along", regardless of whether it is right to do so.

Does anyone here have any experience with sheep? I just wondered if, when "leading the flock", the shepherd actually leads from the front, or from the middle of the flock, or whether the shepherd chivvies them along from the rear? There are many styles of leadership, and no one style is superior to another. The true test of good Christian leadership, for both clergy and laity, is not our *style* of leadership, but the *spirit* in which it is offered. Is our leadership inspired by the Good Shepherd, or by other, more secular considerations?

Most of us approach leadership in all aspects of life with somewhat mixed motives. We lead because it earns us a living; we lead because we enjoy being out front; we lead because *someone* has to do it; we lead because it meets a need to be needed; we lead because someone told us we had to; we lead because we felt called to a particular ministry; we lead because we have skills that are badly needed; we lead because we can't stand the mess others might cause if they were to take the lead; we lead because something inside us says we must; we lead because we'd rather be the shepherd than the sheep; we lead because others expect it of us.

Some of these motives are more admirable than others – but all of us, no matter *where* or *how*, or even *why*, we exercise leadership, need to keep the image of the Good Shepherd before us: the one who willingly serves and gives of himself, the one who has the sheep's best interests at heart, the one who feeds and nourishes and offers rest, the one who leads through dark valleys and helps us face enemies and restores our souls. In contrast to the shepherd who raises sheep to be shorn and eaten - to preserve his or her own life - we lead to preserve the lives of those who journey with us.

I need to go back to what I said earlier: that if anyone is the Shepherd of this congregation, it is the Holy Spirit, who is one with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and the Shepherd God evoked in the 23rd Psalm. I, and the Board, and Session

and Stewards and all of the congregation's leaders, lead in the name of the Holy Spirit, and we seek our guidance and the path for our journey *from* the Spirit. If we are shepherds, we are assistant shepherds only. It is the Spirit that will lead us to streams of living water. Whether we lead from out front, in a "Hey, follow me!" manner, or from the middle, encouraging others to walk alongside us, or from the back with a gentle nudge or an occasional prod from behind, we ourselves are being led by another Shepherd. To know where the Shepherd leads requires prayer, study, conversation, listening. It requires prayer for ourselves as leaders and for those who walk with us, and it requires being lifted up in prayer by others. It requires studying Scripture and the insights of others who are walking similar paths and looking for the answers to similar questions; it requires important, meaningful congregations both as leadership groups and as a wider congregation about where the Spirit may be calling us and about what is important to Christian living; and that conversation requires careful listening: listening to one another, listening for God's voices, and listening to those who may be outside of this particular flock, but who still belong to God.

To step back into the world of Garth Turner and the upcoming elections for a moment, what applies to leadership in the Christian church applies to leadership in the secular world as well, for it is in that world that we live our faith every day. Whether or not you are an admirer of Mr Turner's, he raises some questions we would do well to consider. Are the people we are being asked to vote for leaders, or sheeple? Are we going to put blind trust in a person or a political body, or are we going to ask questions and challenge them to do better? Are we going to be accountable to one another, and are we going to hold our leaders accountable? If the role of a good leader is to care for the lives of those for whom they are responsible, then how will our candidates and our party leaders rate? And with the words of 1 John in our ears, we might ask, whether those who are in need will be served by the decisions we make in this election? Will we make the wellbeing of those on the margins of our society a higher priority as we go to vote than our own self-interest? That would be leadership – democratic leadership – the leadership of people who are not sheep; who defy the narrow self-interest promoted by our society to seek something better and higher for others. I think if we could do that, no matter what the outcome of the election, we could hold up our heads and say that we have done the Good Shepherd proud.

The reality of life in a democratic society, and a democratic church, is that we are each, at one and the same time, both sheep and shepherd, follower and leader. Thank God that we have the example and teaching of Jesus Christ, to keep us on a path that leads to life. As Jesus chose obedience to higher values, so can we. As Jesus chose to put himself on the line for the healing and salvation of others, so can we. As Jesus found his hope and his courage in his intimate relationship with the living God, so can we. We are not *sheeple*, we are disciples, led by the Holy Spirit, who follow Jesus and who lead others to him and to the life he lived, the life he gives. It is a role that is both a great responsibility, and a great gift. May we lead, and follow, in faithfulness. Amen.