

Just Another Shepherd Sermon

The last academic year has perhaps been my busiest since I began teaching at Trinity School for Ministry. My apologies to those who perhaps thought I had abandoned my blog. Summer is finally here. I preached the following in June term chapel last week.

Psalm 102
Ezek 34:17-31
Heb 8



It is often the case that different passages of Scripture contain variations on the same themes, or, sometimes, the same symbols. When we look at the different ways in which the similar themes and symbols are developed, we can find ourselves in the midst of a conversation among the biblical writers in which they not only address one another, but ourselves as well. What are those common themes in this morning's lectionary readings? How do they apply to the church today? More to the point, I presume that I am speaking to a group of shepherds this morning, and shepherds is one of the themes. That is, I presume that most of you in my audience today are either clergy or studying to be clergy, or have some kind of leadership role in the church where you are responsible for other Christians. How do these passages speak to those who are called to be shepherds?

First, the passages talk about enemies. More specifically,

God's people have enemies. Let's begin with the Psalm as the starting point in our conversation. Psalm 102 is one of a group of what are called "Lament Psalms." The Psalmist prays that God would not hide his face in the day of distress, and it is clear that distress is caused by the "enemies" of verse 8, who "torment me" all day long, who "deride me," and "use my name for a curse." The context indicates that the enemies are those who have destroyed Jerusalem, and the setting for the Psalm is likely the time after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, in 587 B.C., when Israel was taken into captivity. (The clue lies in verse 14 where the Psalmist says that "Your servants hold her stones dear and have pity on her dust," and verse 13 makes clear that the "her" refers to Zion, or the city of Jerusalem.) The enemies from whom the Psalmist prays to be delivered are the enemies of God's people.

In the West, this message that God's people have enemies has largely been forgotten until recent years. Until a generation ago, most Christians could exist comfortably in our culture. We identified ourselves with something called the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The group that most influenced culture was called "main-line Protestants," and Anglicans or Episcopalians, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, all were comfortably part of that group. That world no longer exists. More and more, if Christians are simply going to who they are as Christians, they are finding themselves something like Israel in exile, or the early church living in the midst of pagan Rome. Our values are no longer the culture's values, and we have enemies. Perhaps that is a good thing because it helps to rid of us of the assumption of previous generations had that being a good Christian was simply the same as being a good American.

These passages make another point, and perhaps, a more important one. The church has enemies, but the enemies are not all outside the church. The enemies for the Psalmist are

foreigners, outsiders, those who have taken Israel into exile. Ezekiel 34 is written in the same cultural setting, the exile into captivity and the destruction of Jerusalem. But the passage in Ezekiel is clear that there is another set of enemies. In Ezekiel, the enemies are insiders; they are the "shepherds." Who are the "shepherds"? The "shepherds" are the leaders of Israel, those who were supposed to care for the sheep. Instead, however, God condemns the shepherds for eating the sheep, for clothing themselves with their wool, for slaughtering them, for getting fat off them. God says through the prophet in the earlier part of the chapter: "The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them." Yes, Israel is in captivity, but it is the fault of the shepherds. The prophet writes that "my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd . . ." (Ezekiel 34: 4, 8) In the section we read this morning, the metaphor shifts a bit, and God speaks not of bad shepherds, but of bad sheep: "Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture . . .? The prophet compares the leaders of Israel to pushy sheep: "You push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad." (Ezekiel 34: 21)

So God's people have enemies, and those enemies are not necessarily outsiders, but sometimes are those very leaders that God has assigned to guide and protect his people. As the cartoon possum Pogo used to say, "We have met the enemy and he is us." This is a hard message to hear for those of us who are supposed to be Christian leaders, whether we are clergy or students studying to be clergy or bishops or seminary professors. Those who are leaders within the church have a tremendous responsibility. Our primary responsibility as shepherds is to feed and guide the sheep, not to manipulate or oppress them.

The mainline churches are in a terrible mess these days. We could make the argument that a major reason for this mess is that the shepherds have forgotten that their main responsibility as shepherds is to feed their sheep, not to impose their own political or personal agendas on them. However, we need to be careful here. There is a danger in the current crisis once more to hear the message so that the enemies become outsiders. So we can agree that there are shepherds who are enemies of the sheep, but the shepherds become "them," "those shepherds," not us. It is those other guys who have messed up the church. Certainly those "other guys" have done their fair share to make a mess of things. But Ezekiel's message is not heard unless we are willing to apply it personally. Those of us in Christian leadership, perhaps even more so, those of us who claim to be orthodox Christians, need constantly to be asking ourselves, "Whose agenda am I serving here?" Am I shepherding those whom God has put under my care? Am I feeding the sheep? Or am I using them to advance my own territory? Even worse, have I reached the point in my ministry, where I view the sheep in my care as if they themselves are the enemy? Do those under my care, heaven forbid, have reason to view me as the enemy? On judgment day it will be a fearsome thing have to answer for those times when sheep of the flock that has been entrusted to me have prayed something like the prayer of Psalm 102, and they have had me in mind when they have prayed for deliverance.

Given that the church has enemies, given that we as shepherds may be the church's enemies, what is the solution to the enemy problem? Again, it is interesting that we so often get this wrong. As we presume that the church's enemies must be outsiders, so we also presume that if there are enemies, it is our job to do deal with them. It is perhaps the nature of shepherds to want to do something about problems. Perhaps that is why we went into the shepherd business in the first place. All three of the lectionary passages point to a solution to the enemy problem, but the solution is not that we do

something about it. The only solution that the passages offer to the enemy problem is eschatological. All three passages indicate that the problem of enemies is something God will deal with. In his own sweet time, and in his own way.

The Psalmist calls on God, who “will arise and have pity on Zion.” The Lord will “appear in glory” and “build up Zion.” In the future, “generations to come” will “declare in Zion the name of the Lord and in Jerusalem his praise.” (Ps. 102: 13,16, 21) Ezekiel tells us that God will deliver Israel by judging their leaders, and God will set up a new shepherd, a proper leader who will be a king like David: “I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them, and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them.” (Ezekiel 34: 22-24) In Hebrews, the metaphor has shifted, but the point is the same. The writer to the Hebrews does not use the metaphors of sheep and shepherds, but of the temple and the priesthood. The writer of Hebrews reminds his readers that it is Jesus, who is the true priest, the mediator of a new covenant: “We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord has set up.” (Heb. 8: 1-3) It is Jesus who is the True Shepherd, the Great High Priest, the Davidic King who will deal with God’s enemies, and bring peace to his people. And Jesus alone.

And again, this is a hard message for those of us who are Christian leaders to hear. If we do not want to hear that we may be the enemies of God’s people, we especially do not want to hear that God has not decided to use us as the solution to the church’s problems. And, of course, we are more than eager to be the ones who deal with the problem of God’s enemies. Or at least those we perceive to be God’s enemies. Or at least our own enemies. And let’s be honest. Aren’t we too often tempted

to think that those who are our enemies must be God's enemies?

But the message we need to hear is that it is Jesus and only Jesus who is the Good Shepherd and the High Priest and the Davidic King. It is neither our privilege nor our responsibility to play that role. We are not the Savior who has laid down his life for the sheep. And we are not the Davidic King who is to rule in righteousness. Even more so, if we are not the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, heaven forbid that we should be the opposite, the one who thinks it is his responsibility to save the sheep with threats, with beatings, with manipulation. How many times have we heard sermons preached the entire point of which seemed to be to remind the sheep that they are bad sheep, that they really don't deserve to be sheep, that they need to get their sheeply act together?

Now, if the ultimate solution to the problem of enemies is eschatological, and it is Jesus and Jesus only who is the Good Shepherd, does this not lead to passivity? Are Christian leaders supposed to go around singing the old Doris Day song, "Que Sera Sera, Whatever will be will be?" Are we to go through life in Pollyanish bliss, pretending that things like church splits and property law suits and apostate bishops simply do not exist? No, to be a shepherd is to follow a vocation, and having a vocation means to obey a call. But it makes a difference how we follow that vocation, how we obey that call. And it makes a difference whose call we are hearing, and whose call we obey. If we cannot be Jesus, if we cannot be the High Priest or the Good Shepherd, nonetheless, we are called to be disciples of Jesus, and we are called to emulate Jesus in dealing with those sheep whom we are called to serve as shepherds. How did Jesus serve the sheep? John's gospel tells us that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10: 11) In Hebrews, the High Priest offers himself in sacrifice, and he intercedes for his people. And how did Jesus deal with his enemies? He forgave them, and he

died for them. Perhaps that is something of our calling as shepherds. To love the sheep. To be patient with them. To forgive them, as Jesus forgave us. To intercede for them, praying for them as Jesus prayed for his own disciples. And, if necessary, to lay down our lives for the sheep. And to trust God to take care of the church's enemies, and even our enemies, in his own way..

But it is not the job of those of us who are called to be shepherds to be the Savior of the sheep or to execute judgment on God's enemies. Only Jesus can do that. And remembering that is not such a bad thing. There is only one True Shepherd of the sheep. And those are awfully big sandals to fill, way too big for us. How about we let the Good Shepherd be the Shepherd of the sheep?