

Twelfth Sunday after Trinity 2015

Hebrews 13: 16 – 21

Being a son of Huddersfield the sight that most reassures me that home is within striking distance is when I'm driving up the M1 and I first get a glimpse of Emley Moor TV mast. I feel that I'm on the homeward straight. And I've been wondering what the equivalent is for Brid. I think it's perhaps when you get somewhere just east of Driffield and you first see the beam from Flamborough Head light house strobing the sky line: then you know you're getting home.

I suppose it's a bit like that reading Hebrews chapter 13. You get to the bit that says "Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep . . ." and you've arrived at something familiar, something reassuring. Of course it may be that there's nothing familiar about the passage at all, but if you were thinking "Ah, yes:

that passage" as we got there, it's probably because it's used as the preamble to the Easter blessing. We've got to the climax, although not strictly speaking the conclusion, but certainly the climax of the salvation drama which has been being played out since the beginning of Advent and this short, pithy passage, summarises all that Jesus stands for in that process. It communicates extremely powerfully: Jesus is the great shepherd of the sheep. It never fails to speak eloquently of the promise of protectiveness and security.

But I've often wondered why it communicates so powerfully. In theory it should be past its sell by date. Images from an ancient agricultural society, where every family had a direct link with the reality of producing and providing food and clothing, should have no currency in the post-industrial west.

I know that we do always have to be reminding ourselves of how rural the context is in which the

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Priory is set. Bridlington may be a town, but it's hardly urban living when you have to drive 40 miles before you get to so much as a dual carriageway; and you know, something between two thirds and three quarters of the Priory's parish is farm land. And some of that is sheep pasture. The Gilsons at Grange Farm (not the Grundys, you understand: the Gilsons) they keep inviting me up for a night's lambing and I keep saying that I must set aside a night to spend with them in the lambing pens. But even so the overwhelming majority of farm land round here is just vast, prairie like expanses of high-tech mechanised agrarian agribusiness.

And yet the image of Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, abides. And this week I've just got a hint at a possibility of why that might be.

We've just had a family holiday in Rome. It's the first time we've been. So, like all rooky Roman visitors, our itinerary included visiting the Vatican museum. There

there's a whole museum's worth of rooms devoted to fourth century sarcophaguses. And remarkable number of them – in fact a whole hall of them within this exhibition – have a Jesus the Good Shepherd figure carved in relief in the centre of their front: a shepherd carrying a sheep cradled over his shoulders with front legs down one side of his chest and rear legs the other.

Apparently why this is so prevalent on these stone coffins is for two reasons. The first is to try to syncretise the new Christian religion with the old Roman one which preceded it. Hermes is the Roman name for Mercury, the messenger of the gods and guide of dead souls to the Underworld. In pre-Christian Roman funereal art he's often depicted transporting the soul into the Underworld as a shepherd carrying a sheep across his shoulders. So Jesus the great shepherd of the sheep on your coffin is at least a nod and a wink towards Hermes being responsible for getting your soul into the Underworld.

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This image of the sheep draped over the shepherd's shoulders is also reckoned universally to symbolise altruism at the time: the sheep may be a dumb creature, but the shepherd puts its care and safe conduct before his own convenience: he bothers to carry it.

So however far removed we may be from a hand to mouth, pastoral, rural society, the image of Jesus the great shepherd of the sheep reaches deep down into our consciousness and releases a whole treasury of theological truths of the nature of the God we meet in Jesus; who did not cling to equality with God, but emptied himself taking the form of a servant; whose majesty is found in meekness; whose richness is found in poverty; and whose strength is found in weakness.

All of which helps if we read it back into the bit of Hebrews 13 that precedes the bit that makes us feel we've arrived at some place reassuring; the bit that goes on about obeying your leaders and submitting to

them. This is dangerous stuff. It may be the most hackneyed of quotes that Marx said religion is the opium of the people, but we know that it's been so scandalously true: generations of mill workers too afraid to be seen not at church or chapel; being brain-washed into conforming; being told they must put up with impoverished homes and unsafe work places because theirs was not to question their leaders and their reward would be in heaven.

It's been said, granted pretty well tongue in cheek, but it has been said that what prevented the French Revolution from spreading over the channel was Methodism. Of course there's a positive aspect to that. A strong evangelical faith gives you self-respect and the dignity with which to endure oppression. It gives you the resources with which to refuse to be defined by the material conditions into which other people subject you. But there's also the cynical suspicion that it fobs people off with promises of jam for tomorrow

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and makes them too docile to resist being reduced to mere units of production.

But, of course, there is no Christian virtue in being compliant to leaders such as those. There is no virtue in being complaint to leaders who trade on our anxieties and prejudices; who promote an aggressively selfish and individualistic society; and who pay scant regard to notions of the common good. When we see leaders exhibiting the characteristics of Jesus the great shepherd of the sheep – venturesome love, radical compassion, subversive inclusivity – then, perhaps we'll submit. But until then, let's preserve a healthy, a holy cynicism.

Amen.