

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter 2021

The attempt by the multi-millionaire owners of some of Europe's biggest football clubs to create a "super-league" has caused considerable outrage in the football world. One senior football executive commented that the plan of these wealthy owners was, "just to fill their pockets which are already so full that it would be hard to put any more in!" They have been accused, by many, as having "*no concern*" for the "beautiful game", and are only interested in personal gain. Although a relatively inconsequential news story, it does guide us to see the point that Jesus is making in today's Gospel passage. There, he is distinguishing between authentic leadership and that which is false.

Today is World Day of Vocations, which serves as a reminder that Christianity is first a call – Christians are those who, in the words of Jesus, "*listen to my voice*". He says of himself, "*I am the good shepherd*". What does he mean by "good"? We might possibly understand it to mean "effective", in other words describing the quality of the "shepherding", but in its original usage it includes concepts such as, "true", "authentic", and "beautiful". We are to grasp the sheer fascinating appeal of what, he as the shepherd, does – he "*knows his own*", and "*he lays down his life for them*". In what is admittedly a rather colloquial phrase, - Jesus is the real deal! Calling Jesus "*the good shepherd*" emphasises the enthralling power of his love, a love that does not count the cost. As the true shepherd, Jesus calls all "*who will listen to his voice*" into a bond of trust and love, and into a way of living that is truly beautiful.

The contrast between the qualities of the good shepherd and "*the hired man*" is clear to see. The hired man, in a time of crises, "*abandons the sheep and runs away*"; he is, as we say, "in it for what he can get out of it"; he is a functionary with "*no concern*", no love, for those in his care. The attitude of Jesus, on the other hand, is one of radical love: he is so committed to those who are his own that he will lay down his life for them.

We, who live in that bond of love and trust with Jesus, must surely reflect something of that compelling love of The Good Shepherd in our everyday lives? For whom do we lay down our lives? As a priest, a parent or grandparent, as a professional or businessman or woman, as a worker or a student, as a retired person, we each need to be constantly challenged by the question, “Who needs my caring attention this day?”

Pope Francis, in a recent comment, translated this challenge into very practical terms; he said, “Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife.....Do you work for a living? Be holy by labouring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters. Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus? Are you in a position of authority? Be holy by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain” (*GeT 14*). Are you a doctor or a nurse? Let your hands be the gentle hands of Christ. Are you a teacher? Lead your students on pathways of wisdom. Are you a priest or deacon? Live what you preach. Those who influence our lives Jesus calls “shepherds”, and we, in turn, are “shepherds” to those whose lives we touch.

The first Christians did not lead a life that was marked out by any singularity - they followed the local customs in respect to clothing, food, and everyday conduct. Nevertheless, there was something strikingly different about how those Christians lived that made people pause and wonder. Tertullian, a writer of the early Church, recorded that it was said, “See these Christians how they love one another!” That which puzzled people about Christians in those early centuries, must surely continue to be the only reason why people of our own time wonder at what it is that lies at the heart of our lives? Only loving service, exercised in so many everyday ways, makes Christian living enthralling and compelling.

Today, Pope Francis points to a great saint, who lived a radical love in very ordinary, everyday ways, that is, St Joseph, spouse of the Blessed Virgin. He was, in the Pope’s words, “so close to our own human experience”. He did not do astonishing things, he had no unique charisms, nor did he appear special in the eyes of those who met him. He was not famous or even noteworthy: the Gospels do not report even

a single word of his. Still, through his ordinary life, he accomplished something extraordinary in the eyes of God. (*cf World Day of Vocations 2021*)

May we make the way of the Good Shepherd, the vision of our lives, serving him by caring for one another, with a fidelity that is a powerful testimony in an age of ephemeral choices and emotions that bring no lasting joy. May Saint Joseph, carer and protector of the Holy Family, pray for us. **Amen.**