

# Shepherd of the Sheep

I read a very harsh statistic the other day which revealed just how severe the March weather with its bitter east wind and devastating snow had been. It would seem that the cost to the country in lost livestock was estimated at 50,000, mostly sheep, mostly buried under drifts of snow. The effect of this on our farmers (and for farmers read *shepherds*) must have been devastating. The images shown on T.V. of them going out into the wilds of the frozen countryside, searching and looking for their lost sheep were heartrending. Such conditions demonstrate the harsh and turbulent environment in which they work, and recovery will be difficult for them. However what came across very forcibly from those T.V images was the sense that every farmer, every shepherd, felt a real connection with their livestock such that every sheep lost, left them feeling desperate. Today's gospel gives us the image of Jesus as the good shepherd. It is a beautiful image, one that has made an indelible mark on our Christian psyche, because it is an image that addresses a harsh reality; that for the majority of us life is difficult, challenging and tinged with loss.

It is not unreasonable for us to wonder what Jesus thought the effect his words and deeds would have on people. He knew that what he was saying was controversial and hard to take in. He knew that what he was saying would also polarise communities and create divisions. Yet he knew that for people to truly understand and grasp the immensity of what he was telling them, it required a moment of crisis, a moment of judgement. Many of his followers found this both perplexing and troublesome as the language he used was often controversial and made no sense to them. As evidence of this you only have to cast your mind to the end of Chapter Six of John's gospel where you read: *After this many of his disciples went away and accompanied him no more.* The fact is that sometimes what he said caused deep anger and dispute, so much so that some people were prepared to stone him (just read the next verse following on from today's gospel). Now we find this reaction difficult to understand because we view Jesus through 2000 year old Christian eyes. However for a first century Jew to hear Jesus say *The Father and I are one* was explosive language indeed. But I doubt that this worried Jesus that much. What concerned Jesus more than anything was not necessarily their response to his words but their practice of what might be termed false or bad religion and this is what should concern us too because bad religion distorts and twists the truth of the message of God's love. If it is false or bad religion that we are creating and effecting then better to walk away.

The whole point about the shepherd in today's gospel is that he knows that the sheep who listen to his voice will never be lost. Why? Because this shepherd knows what true religion is, and he is prepared to be the expression of that for his sheep. False religion, bad religion, ill-considered religion, is religion that simply demands but fails to give. It is religion that takes but is unable to offer. It is religion that burdens but never seeks to share the load, and that's enough to turn anyone off. Sadly this is how a lot of people perceive religion today. Many have been on the receiving end of this false religion and as a result they have lost their trust in the shepherd. This is the tragedy which confronts us and it does us no good. As a consequence many people fail to experience the beauty and love that lies at the heart of self giving. They fail to discern the unity that is found through shared values and ultimately they miss out in experiencing the fullness of life because they no longer listen to one who can truly shepherd them. We need to show that our faith in Jesus centres peoples' lives around and on a love which makes space for each person to grow and relate to God. Such an experience comes through knowing Christ the good shepherd, who because he lays down his life for us, knows each of us, loves us and will never let us be lost.