

SHEPHERDS, SHEEP, AND WOLVES

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Easter, 2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day, Recent events, and Things I have recently read

By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

Today, every item in the Propers except for Psalm 146, speaks explicitly about shepherds and sheep; but Psalm 146 tells us, without speaking about sheep, of all the benefits we receive from the Good Shepherd, the Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ. As I said in my sermon for the Second Sunday after Easter last year, this Sunday might just as well have the informal name of “Good Shepherd Sunday.” In keeping with that idea, this morning I am going to talk about shepherds, sheep, and wolves; and some other things

Our recognition of our relationship with God starts with one sentence from the first Canticle of the Morning Prayer service, the *Venite Exultemus Domino*. This is the Canticle that is on page 9 of your PB, which begins with “O Come let us sing unto the Lord, ...” The sentence that we want to look at is this: “For He is the Lord our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand.” “We are the sheep of His hand.” I can hear the gears grinding in some skulls: We aren’t sheep; sheep are weak, fearful, stupid, smelly things that are essentially useless except for their meat and wool. If you think that way, maybe you had better rethink along a different line, starting with the fact that we call Jesus the Lamb of God, and that it was His sacrifice of Himself as a pure, spotless Lamb that bought us our Redemption and Salvation. Then you might also remember that in the 5th chapter of the Book of Revelation, there was no one in heaven found worthy to open the great scroll that was sealed with seven seals until the Lamb appeared, the Lamb Who is described in Revelation 5:5-7 **behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”** 6 **And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.** 7 **And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne.** And after the Lamb took the scroll, the company of the 24 Elders and the 4 living creatures sang to Him: Revelation 5:9-10 **9 And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, 10 and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."**

The Good Shepherd is a Lamb, and we are the sheep of His hand. If that seems paradoxical, so be it. I am happy to be such a sheep if that is what it takes to be a child of God and a brother of Christ.

Sheep require shepherds because they are prone to wander and there are wolves and other wild beasts that like to eat them. For that reason, almost all shepherds carried weapons, just as did, King David, with his rod, his staff, and his sling. The rod was a kind of club, heavy on the business end, but light enough that it could be thrown. Cities and countries need shepherds also because they too have enemies. We just don't usually call them shepherds; instead they get called policemen or the military

Our military shepherds killed a pretty bad wolf this past week, Osama bin Laden; and many people are still talking, and arguing, about that. There is no doubt that **ObL** was a murderer, and that God prescribes capital punishment for that in several places in the Bible.

When I heard the news of bin Laden's death, I felt a momentary flash of pleasure; but then a sense of soberness descended on me. It took me only a few seconds to realize why.

The services of both Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer use the same prayer of Absolution, and I have been having those services often enough that I have memorized that prayer. That prayer begins with this: **Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he turn from his wickedness and live,...** That beginning has its foundation in two verses from the book of Ezekiel, Ez. 18:32 and Ez. 33:11, both of which say almost the same thing, although in different words. In Ezekiel 33:11, it says **11 Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live:** Proverbs 24:17-18 also came to mind: **17 Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles, 18 lest the LORD see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from him.**

All that I am saying here is that I think the celebrations should not have happened because Scripture tells us that they were not pleasing to God. I am NOT saying that **ObL** should not have been killed. Killing him was not an act of revenge; it was simply the execution of a murderer according to Genesis 9:6, Numbers 35:17-34, and Deuteronomy 19:10-13. It is right and proper to celebrate the efforts of the Navy Seals and the others who carried out that mission of justice. We just shouldn't celebrate the death of the wicked. It was simply a matter that our

protective shepherds managed to hunt down and kill a wolf that had killed many of our flock. It is hard to strike a balance in a case like this when the wolf is human.

As I often do when I go on vacation to a large city, I end up going to a lot of bookstores; and I come home with a lot of books. One was a little one that I read all of this week. It's title is: *In Constant Prayer*, which, of course refers to St. Paul's command to us in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to ¹⁷"pray without ceasing." In that book by Robert Benson, I learned that the Jews had a tradition that goes back 4000 years before Christ of praying seven times a day. This tradition is mentioned in verse 164 of Psalm 119: ¹⁶⁴Seven times a day I praise Thee for your righteous rules. This tradition came into the early church and was part of church life up until the Reformation.

There were 7 short services for different times of the day. The services were called: *Lauds, Prime, Terce, None, Sext, Vespers, and Compline*. Holding each of these seven services every day continues in some monasteries, but not in ordinary church life. In our Anglican branch of the Christian faith, we keep a dilute and watered-down version of that tradition with Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. Those two services were put together by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer by merging parts of those seven devotions. Obviously, each of those seven services was much shorter than either Morning or Evening Prayer. Now, let me ask an obvious question for which I am sure the answer is would be a universal and resounding, NO!: Does anyone here have seven set times during each day at which you pray a specific set of prayers at that time?

While I was still reading the last part of that little book, I came on an article entitled "Low Sunday" by a man named Jeff Marx who has been a priest in the Episcopal Church since 1999. In it he was complaining about poor church attendance last Sunday, the First Sunday after Easter; and he said he learned that Sunday was called Low Sunday in the Episcopal Church because of the low attendance on that day when compared to Easter. Now, this fellow has a church that had about 450 people attend the Easter services, while he less than 200 last Sunday. With as small as our congregation is, if somebodies in two families catch a cold or go out of town it is noticeable; but to have a drop of over 250 from 450 is almost impossible to imagine.

The thing is that he didn't just write this article to gripe about low attendance. In fact, he said that, "Church attendance is **not** the measure of faith." No, what got my attention was that Rev. Marx tied this article to the news about **ObL** after pointing out something that ought to be obvious: that Easter is not just a single day; it is a season. Easter is a 50-day celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and of all that He did while physically on earth after the day of the

Resurrection. In those 50 days we celebrate and learn from the Resurrection, His appearances on Sunday morning, His appearance in the locked, upper room when Thomas was not there, His appearance to the two on the road to Emmaus, His appearance again in a locked upper room when Thomas was there, and then His appearance to them on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and lastly, his Ascension from the Mount of Olives. Jesus had then left the earth, but the effects of His actions were not yet complete. The Ascension took place on the fortieth day from Easter day, but it was 10 more days to Pentecost, the fiftieth day from Easter when the Holy Spirit came to the disciples, sent by the Father in the Name of Jesus.

Rev. Marx asks, “Do we truly celebrate all this?” Well, maybe, but in a kinda, sorta desultory fashion. Easter is 50 days, but as Rev. Marx says, “We Christians struggle to make it last a week.” What does our behavior say about us in comparison to **ObL** and Muslims in general? Rev. Marx said, “**ObL knew about commitment. He lived his version of the Islamic faith pretty intensely.**”

Now, I would add that most Muslims live their version of the Islamic faith pretty intensely. How do I know this? It isn’t just me; you know it too. Any Muslim who is around any other Muslims is going to pray five times a day. Maybe one might not do his praying on a solo hike in the wilderness, but he would not dare not do the prayers if there were any other Muslims around. The social and religious consequences would just be too heavy.

Now you can see the connection between Mr. Benson’s little book and the death of **ObL**, and Rev. Marx’s article. Mr. Benson wants us to learn to pray regularly, several times a day because he found out that, “You do not become a person of prayer and then begin to pray. It works the other way around. If you pray enough prayers, you may yet become a person of prayer. But you will not become one if you do not pray.” For himself and for others to become people of prayer is one of Mr. Benson’s great goals.

Rev. Marx sees this wild swing in church attendance as indicative of a “**weak and indifferent faith**”. He closes his article by saying, “**If Christians believe that a weak and indifferent faith is sufficient to combat the radical Islam and aggressive secularism which we face, then Christians do not have long for this world. If we cannot get us to celebrate [the] Resurrection, what could possibly motivate us? If we are not excited about the Lordship of Jesus manifested among us, what could ever wake us up?**”

What might wake us up is the power of prayer in our lives. Prayer changes us and helps us open our hearts to the Holy Spirit. Rev. Marx needs to have read a story from the book, *Beyond Our Selves* by Catharine Marshall that was published in 1961. In it, there is the story of how a half-drunken wino named Ernie wandered into the last session of a retreat at a church in New Jersey. There were laymen and clergy there from as far away as Maine. The retreat had not gone well. There had been a lot of discussion and not much prayer when Ernie walked in in seedy clothes, smelling of alcohol, and sat down on the outside of their circle. A crisp-voiced minister who probably had a train to catch tried to sum things up: “It seems to me that all we have been talking about these two days can be summed up in our need for God’s power – the kind of power that changes lives, heals, restores, that ...”

Suddenly the speaker stopped, his attention drawn to Ernie’s sudden, agitated movements as he sat up and then spoke,

“That’s it, That’s what I need. I could use some of that.”

After an uncomfortable silence, Ernie told them his name and how he had tried every known medical cure for his alcoholism. He ended by saying, “I drink too much. I can’t seem to stop. How do I get this power you’re talking about?”

A white-haired minister spoke up in the gentle, soothing tones of a trained counselor, telling Ernie that “We all have problems. It isn’t easy, and it takes patience,..”, when suddenly the word Damn! was almost shouted from outside the inner circle by a young minister named Ted with anger clearly showing on his face. That first Damn was followed by four more before Ted read them the riot act: “This man doesn’t want to hear our problems. He’s asked us a question – how can he get God’s help to stop drinking? We haven’t answered him. If we don’t know the answer, then let’s adjourn this meeting, stop our endless talking, go home and tell our people that the church hasn’t any answer for today. In that case, we better stop being hypocrites and shut the church doors for good.”

Shocked silence was the result, but then, almost simultaneously, five or six men including Ted and the white-haired minister got up and walked over to Ernie. Ted knelt in front of him and asked, “Ernie, do you believe that Jesus Christ can come into your life and change it?”

Ernie was looking at the floor like a child, but said, “Yes, ...yes, I do.”

“Then we’re going to pray, right now, that He will do this for you.”

Then Ted took Ernie's hands in his, and the white-haired minister laid his hands on Ernie's head. The others stood around him with their hands on him as Ted prayed, asking for Christ's healing power for Ernie, for the forgiveness of sins, the beginning of a new life. Then he asked Ernie to pray too, to thank God that he has heard you and that he has healed you.

Ernie, of small faith, said, "I hope so."

"Not hope so Ernie. He has!"

"I -----, Well, I'd like to believe that."

Ted's answer was gentle, but firm, "Ernie, thank Jesus that he has already come into your life."

The room was still. They waited to hear Ernie's quavery voice as he reached up to God. "God, I'm a tired, weak, old man. I don't see what use I am to anyone. But I'd like to find the new life they talk about. Please help me."

That was real and the power of it filled the room. There were ministers there who felt it and needed it as much as Ernie did. One from New England broke down and told of seeing a boat frozen in the middle of a river when he crossed a bridge on his drive down to New Jersey, of how that boat symbolized his own life, frozen and isolated, in fear of failing at almost everything. He asked them to pray for him so that he could get thawed out so he could really help others again. The men did not hesitate and went to him immediately, but Ernie hung back.

Ted walked over to him and said, "Come on, Ernie, and pray with the rest of us."

"Oh no, I couldn't do that..."

Ted took his hand, "Look, Ernie, you've received, now you must give. And we need you now," So he went with Ted and knelt by the spiritually frozen minister and prayed. The minister from New England felt the power of God coming to him and warming him through the channel of the winy breath and simple words of an old alcoholic.

This is a true story, and those who were there said they all felt the power of the Holy Spirit in those minutes of prayer in which they were all renewed.

Here the numbers were reversed. The 90 and 9 who thought they were not lost ended up being found by the one lost sheep who had been sent to them by the Good Shepherd. I would love to see an Ernie shuffle through those doors.

The Good Shepherd, who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, also feeds us with his Body and Blood. The least we can do is celebrate His resurrection on each of these 50 days of Easter and offer Him our sacrifice of prayers, of praise and thanksgiving.

AMEN!