

Thought for the Day, Tuesday 7 March 2023



Matthew 9.1-38: Sheep without a shepherd

When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

In the Bible, “shepherds” commonly refer to the leaders of the people. So here Jesus is saying that the people are leaderless, just milling around aimlessly like a group of sheep, not knowing where to go, not knowing who to follow.

It’s not as though the people of Israel didn’t have any leaders at all: there were the chief priests, the Sanhedrin and all the other authority figures like the

scribes and the pharisees. But those in authority, those in whom authority has been vested, do not commend themselves to the people.

And, from today's passage and many other places in the gospels, we can see why. The religious leaders come across as negative, nit-picking, chiefly concerned for their own status and position, condescending to ordinary people, seeing them as ignorant, the "great unwashed" as the expression has it.

Whereas Jesus, by his words and his deeds, does command authority. He comes from the back of beyond, he hasn't been to the right schools, but when the people saw him they were filled with awe and they glorified God who had given such authority to human beings.

What is it that people saw in Jesus? Why was he different from the others? I think people sensed that he was the embodiment of truth; they saw in him integrity. What do we mean by that slightly elusive word integrity? I think we recognise integrity when someone's words and their deeds are in harmony, and so what struck people about Jesus was that his teaching and his action were one, they formed a seamless unity, an integrated whole. And for that reason people listened to him, they took him seriously, they were even prepared to follow him wherever he led, like sheep following their shepherd.

Who are the people that we really respect, the people we listen to, the people we take seriously, the people to whom we ascribe authority and are willing to follow and try to model ourselves on?

Well, it's often not the people who have been invested with formal authority. Sadly, our official leaders often lose our respect because they are lacking in integrity; their words and their deeds do not correspond; they are, in a word, hypocrites.

This can happen to leaders both in Church and in State. This is why it is so damaging to the Church when it tries to cover up things like sexual abuse scandals. This is why it is so damaging to democracy when politicians are seen to be liars or to be enriching themselves and their friends.

And when political leaders and religious leaders forfeit their authority, we are left like sheep without shepherds. In a society where the Church is seen to be irrelevant and politicians are seen to be discredited, where are people to look for moral and spiritual guidance?

What moral guides are there for young people in particular today? Not many look to the Church; parents, lacking confidence, all too often abdicate their role and leave everything to the schools, so that teachers find themselves hopelessly overburdened with impossible

expectations. It's often celebrities and influencers that people will look to; and they are, to say the least, a very mixed bag.

So it looks rather as if today, just as in Jesus's time, people are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

What should we do about it? What does God want us to do about it? Well, Jesus went on to say: The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.

So if we are finding ourselves a bit depressed about the state of society and the lack of good leadership, what is the Lord of the harvest asking of us? How will he raise up labourers to go into the world and help it become what God wants it to be? Where are the good shepherds for the sheep to follow?

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Merciful Lord, you know our struggle to serve you: when sin spoils our lives, and sorrow overshadows our hearts, come to our aid, and bring us back to you

again; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

