

**“He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”
Sermon by Martin Calderbank on 8th Sunday after Trinity – 22nd July 2018**

It is strange of the Gospel to say that first century Jewish people had no shepherd.

They certainly had guides.

They had the law and the prophets.

They had many of the scriptures we have today.

Literacy was astoundingly high, and those who could not read were still familiar with the texts.

They were regularly reminded of the ethical fundamentals that guide the good life.

But still the Gospel says they lacked something, or more accurately somebody, who could lead them in applying those ethical fundamentals to their daily lives.

To hear some people talk, we might feel we face a worse situation today.

I have sometimes heard people in church moan about the habits of our culture.

Indeed, there sometimes seems to come from Christian circles a sort of negative parlour game, in which we make ourselves miserable by cataloguing everything we see that runs against our values.

But if there is one thing Christians should not be, it is pessimistic.

We above all see our world in light of Christ’s victory.

And that is how I feel about our changing culture.

A stereotypical middle-aged man is supposed to see change and decay in all around.

But I cannot bring myself to do it.

What I see in the next generation is a significant improvement on my own.

I see a thoughtfulness in their attitude, consideration before action, and a serious commitment to doing the right thing.

If we take as examples what used to get some newspapers all fired up, we see that teenage drinking, smoking and pregnancy are all down.

Some have called them “Generation Sensible”.

Above all, I see a real cultural effort to treat all human beings with tolerance and respect.

Such an effort does not follow science, or economics, or self-interest.

Rather it is a statement of faith.

Indeed, it comes close to the belief that all are made in the image of God.

I say it comes close, because it does not go as far as it should.

Tolerance and respect are part of what we owe our neighbours, but we are called by God to go further.

Made in the image of God, we are equipped to be more active than human rights alone suggest.

We are called to love our neighbours.

Church attendance being what it is, few in Generation Sensible would express it this way.

And perhaps that is why I see in Generation Sensible alongside real commitment to goodness, real difficulty working out what that means.

Perhaps they need some shepherds.

In that they would be no different from the rest of us.

Since beginning training for ministry, I have dipped from time to time into the order of the ordination service.

At the very beginning, before the declaration of assent, is a preface that sets out the foundations of the Christian faith, which it says the Church is called to proclaim afresh in each generation.

To proclaim afresh means not just to repeat,

but to express in a way that is meaningful and applicable to the reality of people's lives.

To offer just three examples:

it means drawing lessons for democratic politics from scriptures written in an era of kings and emperors;

it means drawing lessons for a gig economy from scriptures written in an era of slavery;

it means drawing lessons about gender roles from scriptures written in an era of manual labour and no contraception.

This is what the Church is called to do.

This is what it means to be a shepherd.

But shepherding means more than teaching.

It means doing.

First century Middle Eastern shepherds did not stand at the edge of a field working a sheepdog, as shepherds do today.

They walked ahead of the sheep, calling the sheep after them.

Such a shepherd shows way, by travelling the way.

Such a shepherd walks the walk as well as talking the talk.

Such a shepherd is a pathfinder.

If the people seem like sheep without a shepherd, then perhaps nobody is showing them the way by travelling the way; perhaps nobody is walking the walk; perhaps they have no pathfinder.

The question of course is where they might find such a pathfinder.

Our gospel this morning starts with some clues.

It starts with the apostles' report of their mission.

They told Jesus all that they had done and taught.

Note the emphasis of what they had done, not just what they taught.

It is a little like the primary school exercise of show and tell.

Only after they have shown the way, are they able to explain it.

The apostles are able to do this, because they have Jesus as their guide.

So, after their mission, Jesus takes them away for a time of quiet.

Anybody who has reflected in prayer after a challenging task will recognise the pattern.

It is an important part of growing in faith, understanding, and service.

We are the successors of those apostles.

At our baptism, we were called to join the work of the Church, we were called to be shepherds, we were called to be pathfinders.

By living our Christian lives, we can proclaim afresh the Gospel.

We can show how meaningful and applicable the Gospel is today.

We can lead people from tolerance and respect to love of neighbour.

And we can show the joy to be found in such a life.

We do this each time we show love to those society leaves behind, when we visit the lonely,

when we share our meal with the homeless,

when we befriend those

whom others find annoying.

In doing this we are moving beyond the passivity of merely tolerating their choices or respecting their individuality.

We are moving beyond passivity to active love.

In that we find all the happiness and beauty that selfless relationships have to offer.

We are living as Christ lives.

And when people ask why we live as we do, they invite us to share the Gospel.

At our best, we can be the fringes of Christ's cloak.

At our best, when people meet us, they can be made whole.

We can be pathfinders who lead the way, because we have a pathfinder who leads the way for us.
His name is Jesus.