

The Shepherd King

John R. Donahue, S.J., Distinguished Professor of New Testament Studies at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore, reports that seventy-five years ago today, Fr. Miguel Pro, also of the Jesuit order, "shouted "Long live Christ the King" moments before he was executed by a firing squad in Mexico City. At age 37 and only two years ordained, he was condemned for ministering to people despite a government ban on the Catholic Church." The story of Fr. Pro is an important one for us this morning as we consider just what it means to celebrate Christ the King Sunday. Fr. Pro's execution reminds us that there is a higher power to which we owe obedience, a power greater than political or military or economic leaders. We have just elected, or re-elected a set of political leaders for our state and our country, and whether or not we voted for these men and women we now owe them our respect and cooperation and we should be praying for God to bless them with wisdom and courage, health and safety. But they are not our ultimate leaders. The President-elect and his advisors are now searching for the right men and women to lead our economic recovery; boards of directors across the country are making decisions about leaders for their businesses to do their part to lift the nation out of economic malaise. Again, we need to support these women and men however we can, with our prayers above all. But they are also not our ultimate leaders. We should pray for those who command our troops in the field and for those in the Pentagon who map out the strategies that all hope will lead to greater peace in our world but they do not command our final allegiance either. I hope that you pray for me on a regular basis and for our Deacons as we seek to lead this congregation, and for Marcia Patton at Evergreen Association and for ABC-USA General Secretary Roy Medley and his staff and, indeed, for all ministers and leaders of denominations and for ecumenical leaders such as Michael Ramos at the Church Council of Greater Seattle. But for all that we represent the intersection of the spiritual realm with the temporal, we vicars of Christ to our respective flocks are still not the ones to whom ultimate authority is given. No, there is only one to whom we must give our hearts and our lives. The great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us, "There must be a realm of truth beyond political competence," and I would add economic or military or even moral competence, and as people of faith, it is there that our first allegiance lies. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus, "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." It is Christ who is King, Jesus who is the head of our Beloved Community.

But what does it mean, to recognize Christ as King? What sort of ruler is he? And how do we go about being loyal subjects to such a king? How do we go about being His Body in the world today? The prophet Ezekiel, writing nearly six hundred years before the advent of the promised King, gives us a picture of the Shepherd King and what his realm will be like. He also warns those who would act in ways that oppose the order of compassion that our King institutes and in so doing, shows us the way to be faithful members of the Beloved Community, a lesson later repeated in words familiar to all of us by Jesus himself.

A few words first about Ezekiel: except for his famous vision of the Dry Bones in chapter 37, you've likely not heard many sermons based on his prophecies. Indeed, in the whole cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary, there are only a handful of passages from this book scattered across the three years. It's a shame, for, as Robert Linthicum writes, "In prophecy after

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prophecy, Ezekiel probably represents the most penetrating and nuanced social analysis that appears anywhere in scripture.” There’s also a pretty good reason for the avoidance of this prophet: Ezekiel was a little weird. Not only did he see a vision of animated bones (“Dem bones, dem bones, gonna walk around”) but, as many of us learned to sing as school children, “Ezekiel saw a wheel, ‘way in the middle of the air,” which later made him a hero of the Eric von Daniken “In Search of Ancient Astronauts” set. His prophecies describing Israel as an unfaithful wife are more graphic than we’re comfortable reading in church and he was apparently the world’s first controversial performance artist, exposing himself and working with excrement to make his points to his audience, actions that today would get him banned from certain cities and cause him to lose his funding from the National Endowment for the Arts.

What’s more relevant to today’s passage is to remember that Ezekiel was actually a member of the spiritual power elite in ancient Judah. He came from a priestly family and when the Babylonians carried off the royal family in 597 BCE, as the first stage of the great Babylonian Exile, Ezekiel was one of their captives. So when Ezekiel criticized the leaders of his country, as we shall hear in a moment, he was speaking with an insider’s vantage point. It’s also significant to know that after the Exile was accomplished, after Jerusalem was destroyed and the greater part of the populace was forcibly marched to Babylon, Ezekiel’s pronouncements changed. After the fall of the nation, he no longer excoriated those whose actions had led to the crisis. Instead, he spoke to the people of the future and of hope, words that seem very apropos to our own situation.

In all of chapter 34, Ezekiel is using a metaphor that would have been familiar to his listeners, that of the Shepherd King. From the Sumerian kings 2000 years before the Common Era on, rulers of the ancient Near East referred to themselves as shepherds. In the first part of this prophecy, Ezekiel has a word from the Lord for the failed shepherds of Israel: “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. . . . Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.” As I read this morning of shepherds who shear their sheep but do not feed them, who neglect their duties of tending the sick and finding the strays, I cannot help but think of thousands of workers laid off, of pension funds abandoned, of an economy in free fall, while executives who have drawn salaries hundreds, if not thousands, of times greater than their minimum-wage workers look forward to a gentle touchdown, thanks to their golden parachutes, funded by the tax dollars of those they are abandoning.

But the laying of blame is not the focus of this passage. Instead, it is a reminder of what kind of shepherd, what kind of king, actually looks over the flock of humankind. While some might shy away from a celebration of Christ the King, I believe it is right to embrace this image because we know what kind of King our Jesus really is. Jesus told us that he and the Father are one and listen again to what the Father tells us about Himself: “I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

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...and I will feed them on the mountains, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak..." Even in this passage from Ezekiel, our Loving Creator looks forward to the day of Emmanuel, God With Us, incarnate in great David's greater Son, Jesus: "I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken." Is this not what we know of Jesus; how he feeds our souls and heals our spirits, how he is our place of shelter in the storm, how he breaks the chains of our slavery and our addictions and sets us free for abundant life in the green pastures of our lives? Let us rejoice, again I say rejoice, for our Savior, the Risen Christ, is King and no earthly power, no government, no army, no economic system, can stand in injustice against the inexorable coming of Christ's Kingdom, the Beloved Community which unites all humankind, not only as the sheep of God's pasture but as God's beloved children, joint heirs with Christ Jesus to the new Creation which we are called to help make a reality.

In addition to the promise, Ezekiel has a word of caution for us, the sheep. We are to go gently in the world, not taking more than our share, not spoiling the pasture and the streams for others. Ezekiel's sheep metaphor here may have some real resonance for those of you who grew up in the Western States. How many of you remember reading about or hearing about or seeing movies about the Sheep Wars in the western U.S.? During the years of free ranging flocks, before land was privatized and fenced, there were often bloody confrontations between cattle ranchers and sheep herders over these very destructive habits of sheep. According to the cattle men, the sheep overgrazed the range and polluted the watering places used by the cattle. Listen to this excerpt from an article in the June 13, 1938 issue of *Time* magazine: "Arizona cattlemen... had been through three years of drought and were being "sheeped" out of existence, as sheepherders brought their huge herds from dried-up northern ranges to graze on land that had been sacred to cattle. Cattle, said the cowboys, spread out in family groups to graze. Sheep followed each other, were bunched by the herder, tramped the range into dust, with the result that the next rain washed off the topsoil instead of bringing up fresh grass." Of course, to be fair, the Sheep Wars had a good deal to do with control of land. After all, as Pastor Dan Bollerud reports in his web-based commentary on this passage, cows are no more courteous than sheep: "I grew up on a farm in Wisconsin, as such I have studied at least to some degree the social interaction of cattle. They will trample and relieve themselves in the water hole so long as they can get a drink of clean water now. Concern for the future, or for others, is non-existent."

Concern for others; concern for the future – these are not traits which mark cattle or sheep but they should be traits which mark the followers of Christ the Shepherd-King. How are we doing, as a people, as a nation? Slowly, Americans are coming to realize that our lifestyle is simply unsustainable. Listen to these facts gathered by Brian McLaren for his book, Everything Must Change: "For example, one-fifth of our planet's tropical rainforests have been cleared since 1960, and rainforests are currently receding at 1 percent per year. According to Worldwatch.org, we are currently operating at one hundred to one thousand times the normal extinction rate, which means that today, one in four mammal species, one in ten bird species, one in four

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amphibian species, one in five reptile species, and half of all primate species are threatened with extinction, with 5 to 20 percent more in each category falling to near threatened status. In our lakes, rivers, and oceans, fisheries are being depleted at twice their replacement rate. And, speaking of water, by 2020, one in three people will suffer from fresh water shortages.” In this country, we comprise approximately 5 percent of the world’s population, yet we use approximately 30 percent of the world’s resources. Michael Helms, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Moultrie, GA, writes, “We should ask the question, ‘When have we used enough resources?’” Are we, the sheep of God’s pasture, indulging in overgrazing?

It’s easy to point the finger at fat cat CEOs, as I did earlier, but all of us must ask ourselves how we are contributing to a culture of economic inequality. Listen again to these words from Ezekiel and remember that these are not addressed to the failed shepherds but to members of God’s flock: “thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.” The problem is not just that the people are being taken advantage of by their leaders. The problem is that the people are victimizing each other. Shades of Pogo Possum, “We have met the enemy and he is us!” Robert Linthicum writes: “Ezekiel notes that people who were just a little higher on the economic, social or religious scale but were not among the elite had imitated the elite, and had themselves taken advantage of those weaker than themselves. Even “animals” within the “herd” had started “bullying” others below them, so that middle classes were bullying lower classes. That was how insidiously the evil of the “shepherds” had entered all of public life, in that it had gotten the people to turn against each other as they aped the values the power elite were practicing!” Are there ways in which we are guilty of this? Do we patronize the big-box, deep retail stores who pay substandard wages and no benefits and sell goods made in Asian sweatshops when we could easily afford to shop locally-owned stores, where locally-produced goods are sold? Do we vote against the future when we reject local bond issues or levies for our schools? Do we decry the idea of a state income tax, which would more fairly spread the taxation burden when Washington State’s sales-tax-based treasury is widely known to be among the most regressive in the nation? Or do we, perhaps, encourage our local officials and law enforcement to do as was done in Atlanta prior to the Olympics there? Did you know that in 1996, the Atlanta city council “passed an ordinance that allowed the police to round up the homeless and transport them away from the main Olympic venues. New homeless shelters weren’t built, nor were jobs or assistance programs improved. No, the homeless were just plucked from their habitual surroundings and dumped unceremoniously in locations remote from the services on which they depended.” Are you appalled? Did you know that the Lynnwood Police had a patrol car outside Trinity Lutheran one Saturday at noon, as that church’s homeless assistance programs ended, so that they could apprehend undesirables as they emerged from the unofficial sanctuary of the church building? I’m pleased to say that City Council President Loren Simmonds, himself a former Nazarene pastor, has taken steps to end such a practice.

In addition to seeking the protection of our Shepherd King, we need to heed his leadings. In Matthew 25, Jesus also reminded his followers that the King would come among his people, separating the sheep and the goats. Who would be counted among the blessed? Who would be known as the true sheep of his pasture? Those who had cared for “the least of these” – the poor,

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the hungry, the weak, the sick, the prisoners, the despised. For in tending to their needs, Jesus said, we would be showing our love for him. That is how we show our allegiance to Christ, our Shepherd King, through the simple acts of kindness and love to those whom God promised to gather and to care for. We can do it through larger actions, as well. As Robert Linthicum writes, “the job of the church is to work as God’s hands and feet in society, seeking to bring about the submission of the systems of every nation and economy to Christ by actively involving itself in working for justice in the public arena.”

In writing of God’s Suffering Servant, a prophecy later embodied in Jesus, Isaiah wrote, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” My sisters and my brothers, hear the Good News: our sins, our brokenness, our selfish choices are all forgiven. Now it is up to us, starting now, to follow the leadings of our Savior-Shepherd, to give our total allegiance to our Shepherd-King. Let us seek the favor of the King, let us do His will, by seeking always to be God’s true sheep, ministering to our sisters and brothers in Jesus’ name and calling the world to join us in the pasture of God’s blessing.