

# Sunday Homily

## SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

18 JULY 2021

YEAR B

“He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

Mark 6:34

### Illustration

This is the age of the expert. And television has been responsible for a whole new breed of them: the armchair expert. Whether it is the couch potato who can see exactly where the professional footballer is going wrong, or the viewer who criticises the TV chef’s technique, we probably all know an armchair expert. Armchair experts are very good on the theory, but never put it into practice. They remain in front of the television set, pontificating, while the real expert gets on with the job.

A similar phenomenon occurs in churches, if people confine their Christianity to Sunday worship. How many of us are guilty, from time to time, of joining together in the familiar words of creeds or hymns, but not taking that message out into the rest of the week and the rest of the world? And we all know people who can quote scripture, but seem to have missed the practical application of it. Sunday Christians are pew experts and, like armchair experts, rarely practise what they preach.

### Gospel Teaching

Today’s Gospel reading illustrates that Christianity demands practice as well as theory. The apostles, returning from their mission, report “all that they had done and taught”. Their mission of teaching and healing mirrors that of Jesus himself. Here Jesus teaches the crowd many things and heals their sick friends and relatives. In the verses omitted from today’s reading, Jesus feeds the five thousand: another very practical outworking of his compassion for “sheep without a shepherd”.

The image of Jesus as Good Shepherd, occurring throughout the New Testament, continues an Old Testament theme depicting God in these terms. Just as Jesus entrusts this task to his followers, to share in his own role as shepherd of the people, so in the Old Testament the leaders of Israel are described as shepherds. It is no accident that both Moses and David actually were shepherds.

An armchair shepherd is of no use to the sheep; shepherds need to be with their sheep, to protect them from harm and lead them in the right direction. Biblical images of shepherds leading their flock contrast with the modern British image

of walking behind them with a border collie, but in biblical times a shepherd needed to go first into dangerous situations. Instead of our own rural idyll of green pastures and rolling hills, biblical shepherds were faced with craggy outcrops and ravaging wolves. Today's shepherds in Britain return to a warm bed each night; biblical shepherds slept with their flocks, ready to act if danger threatened.

Jesus, God with us, lived with his flock. He did not preach the kingdom of God during the day and retreat to a heavenly palace at night. He did not set up a permanent pulpit in temple or synagogue, or restrict his teaching ministry to the sabbath, but combined his teaching with practical demonstration of it, out in the everyday world. Like a good shepherd he was prepared to risk his life for his sheep, and in the Eucharist especially we recall how he sacrificed himself to save us from the sin that preys on us. Jesus practised what he preached, and he sent his followers to do likewise.

## Application

Like the first disciples, we are sent to continue Jesus' mission in the world: a mission that involves theory and practice, faith and works, evangelism and pastoral care. These elements of Christianity must not be separated if we are to remain faithful to the example Jesus himself set us. The very word "pastoral" comes from the word for a shepherd, and it is often used to distinguish practical Christian ministry, the service of others, from what is seen as a higher calling: evangelism. If we remember that the Good Shepherd himself combined teaching and doing, we will not fall into that trap.

We can carry our faith out into the world, in ways that are best suited to our own gifts and situations. Some are ambitious community projects, others are much simpler: visiting, helping and praying for others. Whatever form it takes, practical support of others, when carried out in the name of Jesus Christ, is effective evangelism. Sunday Christianity, unaccompanied by compassion in action, is no better than the ranting of the armchair expert.