

## Shepherds and sheep

Texts: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46

Last Wednesday I attended a service at Westminster Abbey. The service itself, and what was happening outside the abbey, would have resonated strongly with the prophet Ezekiel.

Inside the Abbey, I was attending a service of thanksgiving for the 400th anniversary of the publication of the 1611 King James Bible - a gift to the whole English speaking world from a Scottish King. In the preface, the translators described themselves as 'poor instruments to make GOD'S holy Truth to be yet more and more known'.

Ezekiel would have applauded. He above all other prophets was a man who was totally identified with God's word. In Chapter 2 he described a visionary experience in which he was told to eat a scroll of God's words. The prophet's task was proclaim this internalised word to the people. Ezekiel would have applauded the efforts of the 54 scholars who strove to make the word of God accessible to the people in their own tongue throughout King James' realm.

If celebrating the King James Bible inside Westminster Abbey would have stirred Ezekiel's memory of his own commissioning as a prophet, the Occupy London protesters outside the precincts of the Abbey - yes, they were there, too - the protesters would have reminded Ezekiel of a key theme of his own prophetic proclamation: that disaster was coming because justice had vanished from the land:

They take bribes to shed blood; you take both advance interest and accrued interest, and make gain of your neighbours by extortion; and you have forgotten me, says the Lord God. See, I strike my hands together at the dishonest gain you have made ... (22:12-13a)

'Bribes', 'take interest', 'extortion', 'dishonest gain' - the list has a modern ring. Ezekiel would have had no difficulty in understanding the grievances of the Occupy London protesters. Indeed, he emphasised precisely such matters in the chapter that the Lectionary bids us consider today, Chapter 34. The chapter begins like this:

The word of the LORD came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. (v.1)

Today, the metaphor of 'shepherds' speaks to us of religious leaders; but throughout the ancient world, it was *political* leaders who appropriated this title to themselves. In one of the most ancient law codes that have come down to us, the Babylonian king Hammurabi

describes himself as the 'shepherd of men', the 'supplier of pasture and water', who has been appointed 'to destroy the ruthless and wicked and to prevent the weak from being robbed of his just rights by the strong.'

Ezekiel's complaint is that the shepherds of Israel have done precisely the opposite:

Thus says the Lord GOD: 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 sought the lost ... So they were scattered. (vv.1-5a)

So, God will overthrow these leaders. Instead, as we heard from our reading earlier, God will be the shepherd: 'I myself will search for my sheep ... I will feed them with good pasture ... I will strengthen the weak ...' and so on. God's own summing up of all these metaphors is particularly striking:

I will feed them with *justice*. (v.16b)

Justice, *mishpat* in Hebrew, is a recurring theme in all the biblical prophets. The English word 'justice', with its judicial connotations, doesn't do justice to the Hebrew word, which encompasses the whole of right government, so that *mishpat* definitely includes the just distribution of wealth, and health, and opportunities. So, 'excessive bonuses' and 'unsustainable structural deficits' definitely fall under the heading of an absence of *mishpat*. There is no justice!

So far, Ezekiel is with the protesters, the 'sheep': he addresses a message of judgement to the 'fat cat' shepherds. But then he turns the table, and starts to address the sheep themselves:

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. (vv.20-22)

In other words, the strong constantly elbow out the weak amongst the sheep. It seems that the sheep and the shepherd have become indistinguishable. Someone once said to me that middle age is the age when we finally get the faces we deserve. Well, frighteningly, it seems that the people of Israel got the leaders that they deserve! To mix my metaphors, it's dog eat dog for both shepherd and sheep!

I believe that the question that God is putting to us today through Ezekiel is this: have we as a society also got the politicians and bankers that we deserve? Or, to ask the same question differently, I wonder how many of the protesters in London and Glasgow and Edinburgh were protesting 10 years ago when 'the going was good.' How many of them, how many of us, took advantage of the easy mortgages and credit card overdrafts without any qualms, applauded the bankers who wrought such miracles, and repeatedly re-elected governments that made possible the boom decades? Few, if any, were protesting then. Even as the gap between rich and poor widened alarmingly, the standard of living for all was rising so fast on phantom money that no one complained! We all had a good time. The sheep colluded with the shepherds.

However, such collusion is unsustainable - something will break; that something is human society the way God intends it to be. This point was made in 1597 in a sermon preached at St. Paul's Cross - an ancient open-air pulpit erected very near the site of the current protests outside Wren's cathedral. The economy was booming - the idea of commercial lending and risk capital had started to take hold in London, initially with the goldsmiths doubling up as merchant bankers and venture capitalists. The East India Company and other monopolies had made a handful of people very rich indeed, and the riches percolated down to many levels of society. In middle of this boom, John Howson, who later became Vice Chancellor of Oxford University, said this when he preached at St. Paul's Cross on the second Sunday of Advent, 1597:

If we shall be so affected that every man for his owne commodity will rob and spoyle another man, the society of mankind ... must needs be dissolved.

Unlike the protesters outside St. Paul's today, Howson did not just point the finger at the 'fat cat' leaders. He warns that fundamentally, the malaise in his day arises because *every* person for his or her own gain will 'rob and spoyle' their neighbour. And so it is today. The right response from St. Paul's was neither to side with the protesters in their finger wagging, nor with the leaders of our economy in their comfortable indifference. To be fair, St. Paul's did neither; instead, they did nothing. To my mind, the right thing to do would have been to call for national repentance, recognising that *both* the shepherds *and* the sheep are under judgement. There is no 'them' and 'us'. Through our Gospel reading today from Matthew, Jesus our great Shepherd asks all of us to repent of the times when we have not fed the hungry, not given drink to the thirsty, not visited the those imprisoned in their own homes, and not welcomed strangers.

But we have not heard the call to national repentance from any of our churches up and down the land. Why is that? Giles Fraser, who famously resigned from St. Paul's, suggested this answer in his very last sermon as Canon Chancellor:

‘For too long the Church has been obsessed with its own internal workings and with silly arguments about sex.’

In other words, the Church of God has been caught naval gazing. Canon Fraser goes on to say this:

‘Now is the time for a new debate and a new emphasis. For if we are not fully involved with complex discussions about the relationship between financial justice [*mishpat*!] and the way our financial institutions work, then we might as well give up on being a proper Church ...’

I wonder whether we are naval gazers here at St. Peters. It is certainly interesting that we don’t often discuss the question, ‘How are we doing as a church in seeking justice amongst ourselves and in our community?’ Instead, we seem to be more interested in debating the size of our annual deficit and which version of the liturgy we should use. Perhaps we are in danger of forgetting what Jesus said earlier in Matthew’s Gospel:

Seek first the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness [*mishpat* is part of this righteousness] and all these things will be given to you as well (6:33)

On the other hand, if we don’t seek God’s *mishpat*, then Jesus tells us that on the Last Day, we will be under judgement. Earlier, Ezekiel warned his contemporaries of imminent judgement: they would lose their Temple and their homeland. Some historians say that the bloody civil war that broke out within a generation of Elizabeth’s death can partly be blamed on gross economic inequalities. Howson’s warning of society disintegrating came true. Our readings today challenges us to become a ‘proper church’ before it’s too late.

Let us pray.

God says, ‘Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.’

Lord, have mercy! Amen.