

GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY

Today is often called 'Good Shepherd Sunday' and others have branded it 'Vocations Sunday'. This poster has been up some weeks now advertising yesterday's 'Vocations Fair' inside our Cathedral Church at Bury. "Come and visit the many stalls representing our ministries for an informal chat to find the right ministry for **you**:

Chaplaincy, Children and Families, Elders, Pioneers, Evangelists, Ordained Ministry, PCC Officers, Readers, School Foundation Governors, Spiritual Directors..." The list is a long one to raise, of course, that whole subject of how God calls us and gifts us in so many different and colourful ways, how best to serve and enrich His Church today.

Our first reading today from Acts speaks powerfully of how the earliest disciples didn't just sit around leaving it to the same few people to do everything – their tasks and even their everyday food and money were shared. In the light of the Resurrection we are told of their glad and generous hearts, having the goodwill of all the people. It is all about living in the moment and not the past, it is about discernment which makes way for new directions and new commitment. There is a real energy and purpose to both hearing and following Christ's call.

But be in no doubt, that we are in missionary times so much so, that even wearing a dog-collar can be a cause of strife or upset to some – in much the same way as saying that you are a politician, or a young doctor, or teacher. There is much less respect for vocational work full stop. And people are leaving their different professions in droves and not just because of wages. It is a much more complex contemporary malaise or, one might say, lack of self-belief.

And when this happens in the life of our churches, and someone challenges you: how is the Parish Church of St Mary serving the

poorest of its residents or why aren't we doing more of this or that, we feel threatened, disempowered or just put out.

The Gospel image of the Good Shepherd can sometimes lull us into 'comfort-speak' with God as our constant protector and shield and not as someone who may want us to head for the gate at all; we like the cossetting bit but we don't like the 'leading' bit or God forbid, 'being led'our national life seems to be in tatters on that front, so much so that if you are a football manager, a member of the Cabinet, or Director of the BBC, your days are short because the trust has gone, the direction of travel has been lost, and any sense of 'calling' has been undermined or broken. (The exception of course is the manager of Ipswich Town!)

Maybe we should be more outspoken about how God's voice can change all this discordance and grumpiness. What makes our Gospel reading so compelling and indeed, counter-intuitive, is that the risen Christ calls us to abundant living and that is what the Christian life and body should reflect and represent. It means saying 'No' to personal preferences all the time, the 'Me, Me, Me' culture or the one which says 'I am far too busy'. It means saying instead, 'Yes' to shared belief in community, in the common good and our shared happiness. The gate and life of the Resurrection is surely the life where no-one is excluded or rejected but instead cherished and encouraged. And surely, 'going the extra mile' is the vocation of every Christian soul; just ask a busy person and, actually, they will find time for you, without any excuses.

If you have been following this little book of daily prayers for the Coronation, instead of putting impossible demands or expectations on just one person, all the Bible readings are hinting that all of us need to share the gifts and wisdom of God, to cheer us certainly, but also to help us live pioneering, Christ-filled lives. In this final week of preparation for King Charles, we pray that we too may be patient,

kind, generous, faithful, and gentle in our calling as the people of God in this place. And on the big day itself when our Church doors are firmly open, and everyone is invited in, and you bring along your own copy of the Coronation service so that we can join in the hymns, may I quote from Day 28: 'Celebrating Community'?

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Amen.