

A powerful surge passed through Olney on Thursday morning: two powerfully built dark grey limousines with darkened windows accompanied by eight or so police outriders, several in front clearing the way, as the cortege swept through. It was impressive to suddenly see this power at work holding up the traffic in both directions and circumventing the queue by driving, continental-style, on the right. And one can imagine the enjoyment of those inside at their ability to override convention, the frisson of power, no doubt, in the name of upholding a greater power; the need to govern, perhaps, but leaving one also with the uneasy feeling that such privilege distances those in authority from the lesser mortals lining the street or stuck in the queue while the cortege passes. A touch of envy there, perhaps, and schoolboy wonder. But the dynamic of power is worth pondering for it speaks loudly in today's readings and throughout Israel's history: who is really in charge here? Whose people, whose land, whose earth is at issue? And since it's almost certainly the religious authorities of the day which are being targeted in today's gospel, the charge of being mere hirelings is especially sharp for they are wielding authority as if it were their own and not given to them 'from above'. It's not power, as such, which is at issue but from where ultimate authority derives. And the answer in Israel's history is always a surprising one because the shepherds chosen come from such unexpected backgrounds: the younger son privileging the older – and often by deceit; the baby Moses brought up in the court of Pharaoh; the shepherd boy, David, supplanting Saul, who was himself divinely elected from the least of Israel's tribes – and so on. We have the whole puzzle of particularity here. God chooses specific people to bring his covenantal plan to completion culminating in a Messiah born in a stable, while we envisage power operating in quite a different manner: in palaces and dark limousines; in displays of military strength or magnificent Churches, even in such ideas as democracy and popular acclaim. None of this counts, or should count, in Christian reckoning. No, the good shepherd knows his people, like God perhaps, better than they know themselves; for the good shepherd walks with his people, not passing them by on the other side of the street, and knows, indeed, their smell, as Pope Francis puts it, that most intimate of senses. This is not an appeal to populism but to poverty of spirit, to being so empty of self that there is room enough for others, for, indeed, the whole world, for those other sheep, not of the Christian fold, and yet which Christ is called to also lead. Is there a hint, there, that those other sheep do not need to be called Christians in order to belong? That there is a greater principle of unity at work – the authority of love, and dare one imagine that this is indeed the only authority God has?

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