

A favourite expression of Br Herbert in answer to any query that was difficult to resolve was “leave it to God” which could appear trite at times but was a useful bridle in our obstinate and impatient desire to sort things out for ourselves. It’s the sort of trust implied in imagining and imaging Christ as shepherd and king, and God of course too. We necessarily approach God through metaphor and today’s feast is all about metaphor some of which may still make sense but much of it will not, despite sheep on our doorstep and a new king. So we have to work a little harder to envisage the full meaning of Christ as both shepherd and king and, as always with metaphor, we’re talking about best practice – because you can get both good and bad kings and good and bad shepherds and, for that matter, good and bad sheep, or, in the distinction made in today’s Gospel passage, good sheep and bad goats which are allowed to mingle until the shepherd king finally sorts them out. I’m skating on very thin ice here but this brings to mind a recent newspaper article where the shepherd mentions a “pinch-point” or deliberately made narrow gap between one field and another through which the shepherd would encourage the sheep to pass and enable him, or her, to both count and assess them. Echoes here of Christ as both shepherd and gate – but useful perhaps in seeing judgement not so much in moral terms as an act of care. As for the distinction between sheep and goats I can only offer my own confusion at Herod’s great fortress mound just outside Bethlehem where, for the life of me, I couldn’t tell whether I was looking at sheep or goats being shepherded by Bedouin or desperately poor-looking Palestinians very keen to separate us from any small change we had. This may highlight how poor we are as judges of our fellow humanity and the need to leave it to God. This is where that word “trust” re-emerges and the nature of our relationship with God as not one of ‘cowering wee timorous beasties’ (to probably misquote Robbie Burns) but of confidence in both God- and Christ as God’s metaphor – as caring for us to the point of death and in so doing giving us our true freedom, the freedom that is to image God fully, to be fully human. To put it another way: our call, our vocation, may grow out of a sense of duty or guilt, or whatever – fear of hell even – but it’s fullest expression is one of freedom where we are delighting in God and doing good as God delights in us. Not a relationship then ultimately of do’s and don’ts, and fear, but of spontaneity and an unselfconscious transparency to God’s will, a true imaging of God which leaves final judgement entirely to God but, paradoxically, every other judgement to ourselves. This is God trusting us as much as us trusting God. It’s a partnership in which we are not even aware that we are serving Christ.

*Then the virtuous will say to him in reply, “Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you; or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome; naked and clothed you; sick or in prison and go to see you?”*

Ideally we can also be as unselfconscious about resurrection as about this. Able to just “leave it to God’.

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