

Every day, we hear the rattle of Russell Cartwright's waggon or tractor and trailer, going down Jack's Lane and crossing the cattle grid at the entrance to Abbey Park, often accompanied by a sudden surge in the bleating of the sheep: they know their shepherd and he knows them. Occasionally, we see both Russell and Sally out there, putting up temporary railings to catch and check and treat each sheep individually. It's a never-ending job but it's their life and their joy. They have a duty of care but it's not just a duty; not simply for sordid money, but because they are eager to do it. I've heard this several times now from people keeping sheep: once you've kept sheep it's difficult not to. There may be a note of idealisation there from a townie; from someone who doesn't have to do this at all sorts of ungodly hours in atrocious weather, day after day, but it remains a good analogy for the duty of care a Pope has to have for his flock and we all have to have for one another.

Two recent courses on recognising the signs of abuse – physical, psychological, spiritual, domestic, institutional and many more – and another regarding risk assessments, brought home to me that 'duty of care' is, in fact, total. There's no situation in which it doesn't apply. The art is to navigate this without being totally overwhelmed by the legislation. And I think this is what Pope Francis is after in encouraging pastors 'to know the smell of their sheep' and to risk making mistakes in this field hospital which is not only the Church but the world in general. And Peter is, perhaps, a good example of this, caught between a rock and a very soft place; called to be a firm foundation and yet so often getting it wrong in his eagerness to love or, occasionally, in his lack of love; a rock holding out forgiveness as a heavenly possibility for all and yet, so often, in need of forgiveness himself: all too human, like the rest of us.

And this is where our response to authority has itself to be tempered by love; where we have a 'duty of care' which is total. This isn't about an unthinking obedience, then, but a much more subtle interplay of forces in which a recognition of what is truly going on, from the more obvious imbalances of power which a hierarchical Church naturally engenders, to the less obvious but equally potent imbalances of power which take place between ourselves: all are tempered by grace, by that power which only heaven can provide but we, also, as pastors, (that's all of us, as priests, as mediators or God's lightning conductors) can let loose on one another.

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