

Jesus is at that delicate point of forming his disciples into a unified body. Later we will interpret this as a re-creation of a body made in his own image – the church as the body of Christ. As he is so he wishes his disciples to be but this is not the act of a megalomaniac, of someone so full of themselves that they can brook no difference of opinion or behaviour. No, this is the action of a man who wants his disciples to enjoy the same freedom he has in his relationship to God, as a son or child to the Father or to a parent. He's not forming his disciples in order to confine them and keep them at home but to equip them for adult life, for maturity in the Spirit, the maturity he himself has had to learn on his own growth to perfection, to becoming whole. It's a process of growing up which inevitably involves trials and tribulations and failure – not least in the struggle to live with one another. A lot of the subtlety of this can be lost with the image of the Church as a flock of sheep being led by a shepherd unless one is a real shepherd of sheep who will know all the quirks and differences of their individual sheep – no two are the same and the shepherd has to allow for this if he, or she, is to lead them successfully. Jesus has, indeed, just allowed his flock to wander off on its own, albeit in pairs, to discover some of this independent spirit for themselves, and we could interpret the injunction to go in pairs as both a means of support and a challenge, for the companions we are often given in life, especially monastic life, are not the ones we would necessarily choose for ourselves – they may just as well bring the worst out of us as the best. Whichever it is – it's a learning curve questioning the degree of our integration into Christ, of where we are then with God, of how we are with that otherwise very nebulous concept of love. What's missing from the account we heard last Sunday of the sending out of the disciples and of their return today is the beheading of John the Baptist by a king who prefers the interests of his family to the demands of that greater justice and love which we all owe to God. Unlike the disciples he refuses that re-formation which will inspire him to act for the greater love of another, even of a perceived enemy. But we can take that missing scene as representative of the true cost of discipleship, of learning to surrender one's own will only to re-find it in Christ. It's an arduous process this learning to follow God's inspiration rather than one's own and Jesus is sensitive to the weariness of it all, that daily constant battle to be good, to love. And so he leads his disciples to a lonely place where they can find rest and what happens? – they have been so successful that people will not leave them alone and get there first. We look for a haven and find none. Their next lesson is learn like Jesus that even then God is looking after them, that what looks impossible – the feeding of the thousands both in word and deed – is possible in God. This contrast between the shepherding of Jesus and such as Herod is as relevant today as ever in a world in which few leaders seem equipped to love their people rather than themselves. Power corrupts so Jesus has to remind his disciples of the remedy of service. We are not here for ourselves only – whoever we are.

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