

Dear Brothers and Sisters



Thank you for the wonderful celebration last Sunday to mark the 20th Anniversary of Ordination for Fr. Siffredus and myself. I am grateful for the vocation to the Priesthood, and thankful that I am here with you at Our Lady Mother of the Church. A priest is called to be an icon of Christ, the Good Shepherd, and to listen to his voice. Christ speaks to us in the Gospel today: "My sheep hear my voice; I know them and they follow me"

In Wales sheep are everywhere. White specks against green grass! A very common sight.

There was a time when the image of sheep and shepherd was also common in our faith. Prior to the third century, when the image of Christ on the Cross became the essential symbol of Christianity, the

Savior was represented in Christian art, and in the prayers of the first generations of believers, as a young shepherd.

In his book "The Burning Bush" Lev Gillet, a monk of the Orthodox Church, gives seven meditations on what is perhaps the most popular of all psalms, psalm 23, the "Shepherd Psalm". He says:

'There is no doubt that Jesus, when he spoke of the good shepherd, had the twenty-third psalm in mind. He himself had certainly recited it, and knew it even as a small child:

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want"

This is not wishful thinking: 'the Lord will be my shepherd'

This is not a wishful prayer: 'Lord, be my shepherd'

It is a statement of fact: 'The Lord is my shepherd'

The Lord is not 'our shepherd'. Or rather he is our shepherd, but he is also something else and something more. He is my Shepherd.'

It's not by chance that sheep need a shepherd. Sheep have a tendency to go their own way, to get lost or get into trouble, and put themselves in harm's way. When this happens, the shepherd has to look out for them. But what is more valuable, the life of a sheep or the life of the shepherd looking after it? The life of the shepherd, without question. Yet here is Jesus, comparing himself to a shepherd, the good shepherd, saying that his life is subordinate to that of a sheep.

He will lay down his life for the sheep. Unthinkable. Or is it?

I was once in Corsica, a French island in the Mediterranean and was shown the sheep folds which shepherds use to gather the flock at night. A round circle of stones, waist high, with an opening through which the sheep enter or leave the enclosure. There was no door or gate at the opening. The shepherd himself lies down there at night. He is the door; he is the gate. A wolf would have to kill him before getting at the sheep. No one goes in or out except through him. As psalm 121 says: *He does not sleep, he guards your going in and out, now and for always.*

There have been times when we have strayed, been lost, got into trouble, put ourselves in harm's way. Maybe there is someone here in that situation today. The Good News is that Christ, the Good Shepherd, is willing to lay down his very life for us. Together with the psalmist may each of us be able to say: it is true, he is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.

Happy Easter, Fr. Sean