

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Stealing From The Father

The Gospel today tells us that we belong to the Father, that he has given us to Christ, and that the Father and the Son are one - the Greek says "The Father and I are one thing". What is it like to belong to Christ?

I have come that you may have life

We belong to our parents first, and they teach us a great deal about what it means. Our first experience of faithful love is vital to us, and its destruction or betrayal is one of the deepest wounds we can suffer. Yet even such a wound is not the disaster it may seem, even feel like. Our faith teaches us that human love is pointing far beyond itself, drawing our attention to a greater and more perfect gift, for whose inheritance our lives are destined and designed. I wonder how many people realize the meaning of this truth? It can draw the teeth of the cruellest blow that anyone can inflict - the worst betrayal, the sharpest ingratitude. So often we hear of one or another life that has been blighted by this or that infidelity, the discovery of deception, the failure of sympathy, or whatever. As if our lives were still at the mercy of human judgments, we keep our eyes fixed on earthly balance-sheets, locked in the profit and loss of human bargaining, keen in our awareness of human deserving and human worthlessness as they impinge on us and on those who share our life. *And all the time*, Isaiah says, *my cause was with the Lord, my honour in the hands of my God*. We belong to Christ in his passover, we are with him in his readiness to lose everything but the love of the Father. It should make us much readier to pardon the shortcomings of others than apparently we have been so far.

Feel any better about sheep?

Perhaps we could find here this year's re-evaluation of the disturbing comparison with sheep offered to us by Jesus in the Gospel. Doubtless it is, once more, the inadequacy of our earthly pastors that robs us of the beauty of this theme. I'm constantly being told of the iniquity of this priest or that, as a fulsome excuse for neglecting the Sacraments or ceasing to pray. We are so busy resenting the many times priests and bishops have patronised or misunderstood us that we forget the absolute rightness of the image in the Gospel. Jesus is speaking of a *depth of care* that is like the one between shepherd and flock. I feel sure that domestic sheep would perish very soon without the ministry of a shepherd: a glance at the fate of the average wild gazelle confirms that even those very speedy runners have only to suffer a slight disability in order to become easy prey for their predators. It is in the nature of the sheep to need a shepherd, and it is

in our nature - however gifted or sublimely-favoured we may be - to need God: to inherit the love of God is what we are designed for. Our century takes this so hard; we hate to depend or to rely on anyone but ourselves; so it is salutary to be reminded that a sheep, even a very ambitious sheep, is fundamentally incapable of surviving alone.

Look after my sheep

We have been appalled and ashamed of the cases - one would be too many - of abuse and neglect within and beyond the Church, especially in the case of children. The story of this is not, as some feel, something new. It is as old as the wicked stepmother or Romulus and Remus, as old as humanity. But it is not fanciful to suggest that this attempt to rob the Father of his children is related to the distance we have *all* travelled away from the Father's house. It is in our own soul that we have most clearly tried to steal from the Father: in the effort to hi-jack our own lives, to paddle our own canoe as may seem best to us. It's assumed that a modern person must do this: that obedience to God is nothing but an opening for abuse, a form of enslavement for other humans to exploit. So we wander off with our bright senses to guide us, playing our best ideas for all they are worth, and quietly dethroning the God of our salvation. Can our rather vain discomfort with Jesus' imagery of the sheepfold teach us something that can save us?
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