

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Sad Sheep

A little while ago our countryside was devastated in many places by the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. Heartbreaking images of the massive annihilation which the authorities decided to enforce were far surpassed by the sight of so many broken faces, so many beaten spirits, in the farming community. Strong men and women, used to the challenges and hardships of a cold, demanding way of life, were weeping openly as they watched the slaughter; and the land itself seemed to mourn, as the valleys fell silent, the villages were deserted, and so many people had to wonder whether they could ever recover financially.

### The Message Of Animals

I think we leave reality behind if we become separated from children. Forgetting the experience of being a child is very bad for us; we take adult ways and feelings as normative, and we can get things out of proportion. In much the same way animals can remind us of important things that belong to life: dependency, simplicity, even a kind of poverty that flows from mortality. We forget these things at our peril. Jesus himself used our relationship to animals several times as a model for religious teaching. *If your ox or donkey fell into a well, which of you would refuse to pull him out because it was the Sabbath?* That was Jesus' argument for curing a woman's spinal curvature on the Day of Rest. But the great consecrated animal theme of the Scriptures is ancient: that of Shepherd and Sheep, closely linked to the image of the sacrificial Lamb.

### The Needs of the Sheep

Today Jesus sees the crowds, and has pity on them *because they are like sheep without a shepherd*. It has been said that the only individualism allowed into the Gospel is that of the lost sheep. At last, the Fourth Gospel teaches us about Jesus as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. This takes us into new realms, since I guess few of us would understand a devotion to the flock that would go so far. Jesus is telling us that the work of God is measured by our need, not by any preconceived notion of what that need ought to be. This is like the care a parent offers to a baby; it's very little use trying to reason with a baby, however cogent the argument; I'm afraid sheep are even more resistant to human logic. The

shepherd measures his care by their need. In this way he comes to lay down his life for the flock.

### Being a Pastor

Today's Gospel is telling us about the sending of the apostles, and about the situation they are sent to address. If Israel is shepherdless, who has failed them? Surely the scribes and Priests with whom Jesus has already tangled. And how about the world we look out on? Is our situation any better? There are huge numbers of confused, betrayed, homeless souls in our own part of the world. But even the most isolated of us has more care on offer than the average citizen of a developing country. We should respond to these facts as Jesus does: not wringing his hands helplessly, but going for the problems, starting to fulfil the needs.

### What Use Are You?

That celebrated wartime question from Rob Wilton's wife still rings in our ears. Save the world....a lot for one person to do? Surely – but that is why Jesus calls others to help: how many? Twelve – one per tribe: *as many as are needed*. The phrase is used in the story of the Feeding of the Multitude: they gave out *as much as was needed*. Let the Gospel in! We too are called, and must answer: we must all be pastors, because the needs are still so great. They are drawn for us in detail: see the need, catch the compassion. Pray for more labourers, whom God will choose and inspire. And we shouldn't be daunted by the scale of the need; it is the work of God that we are asked to join in. There is every sign that our earthly works are often futile and short-lived, and still we spend our lives trying to make them sufficient. How much more important, and valid, is the work of God the Creator and Redeemer! There is no room for doubt or depression where God is at work. Let the workers see their work as proportionate, truly valid, funded by the power of God: *proclaim the kingdom, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons* – huge gifts, divine gifts, all received from God: and all passed on without charge.  
*Fr Philip*