

## Shepherd and Guardian of your Souls

We are not self-sufficient. We all need the care and contribution of other people before we can be free to be ourselves. This is no discredit to us; self-sufficiency is only a merit when there is no-one to help. But we often feel our need for others as something unfortunate, a kind of weakness. We try to “soldier on”, and our lives become impoverished and exhausted and (frankly) unattractive to ourselves or others.

### The Wolves Are Running

We can become exceedingly vulnerable in this situation, targets for those who “wander through the world like a ravening lion seeking something to devour”; and I don’t just mean supernatural forces like the Devil. The world is full of wolves, in and out of shepherd’s clothing. Woe betide us if we dare to dress up our selfishness as love or care! We become the Enemy.

### The True Shepherd

John’s Gospel is full of the concept of truth. *Work for true bread; look for the way, the truth, and the life; the Word is full of grace and truth.* This Sunday we think of Jesus as the true shepherd, the one whose care can be trusted. This ideal is for all of us, in that we have understood that we belong to one another, are servants of one another, and must take care of one another. There’s no *parallel* way that is “just as good” as The Way; and there is no shepherding, no care, that differs from the care of Christ: *all others who have come are thieves and brigands!* This would be a narrow and improper doctrine if we understood it in worldly terms. In the light of the Gospel its meaning becomes clear: Jesus is the divinely-appointed door through which we can enter into caring relationships with others. If our coming-together is in him, and our life together is obedient to him, we can be safe. If our communities are gatherings of shared greed, or fields of power and domination, then we are in the hands of thieves, and in great peril. So we can give the words of Jesus some serious thought today, and test ourselves to make sure that the love and care we offer to each other is worthy of *him*.

### Priests are Pastors

Some people are called to be pastors in the name of Jesus, in the direct care of the Church. Part of their difference from others is a job-description: they are people the Church loads with various functions and responsibilities. But that is unimportant. It is in their willingness to be made like Christ the shepherd that they are of value. In looking at human life, people judge by a medley of standards; and these can be very elastic! A crook who robs pensioners must be a bad man, but a crook who spies for his country can be a good man. A man who beats up his family must be a bad man, but a man who beats up his opponents in business or politics or the press can be a good man. When God makes his judgment, it will be according to one standard: because each of us is made in the image of Christ; in our multitudinous variety, we still possess one thing in common: our own likeness to Christ. By this standard we are judged. This means that we can all find a way of loving others which is like the trustworthy care of Christ. The Church calls its pastors to offer this sort of care *and no other*; the prescriptions which surround the priesthood are meant to help that to happen. This Sunday, which is a day to pray for God’s call to be heard, we might remember that the aim of the Catholic priesthood is a high one, and not some kind of inhumane obstacle-course dreamed up in the Middle Ages. The wolf-mixed and sheep-divided recipe which is good enough to be called “care” in the world isn’t enough for a Christian priest. Selflessness is an honourable aim for anyone; for a priest it must be the essential one.  
*Fr Philip*