

**BBC SUNDAY WORSHIP 25 APRIL 2010
REFLECTIONS - GEMMA SIMMONDS CJ**

1st Reflection following a reading from Ezekiel 34:1 – 10

The prophet Ezekiel pulls no punches when he denounces the shepherds of Israel. Speaking in God's name he contrasts the theory of how the religious and political leaders were meant to 'shepherd the flock' and the harsh reality of their practice. In recent months we have been experiencing a desperate crisis of leadership within the church, with the media leading a litany of denunciations. Firstly they denounce the small but destructive minority of shepherds who violate their calling through cruel and abusive behaviour. No prophetic words can suffice to condemn this, and no apologies, however sincerely meant, can be enough on their own to heal the wounds inflicted on the innocent. Through the words of Ezekiel, God promises a day of reckoning for such betrayals, and the day of reckoning has begun to fall on us all.

Secondly the media denounce the collusion of those shepherds who covered up the dark deeds of abuse under a cloak of silence and religious obedience. In a period when the Catholic church was undergoing a similar crisis of leadership, St. Catherine of Siena wrote to the Roman Curia of her day, 'Be silent no longer. Cry out with a hundred thousand voices. I see that the world is destroyed through silence'.

Ezekiel contrasts the way in which the shepherds of Israel have used their ministry as a means to exercise abusive power over the flock, and the gentle and loving way in which God promises to shepherd the people: seeking the lost, healing the wounded, strengthening the broken, nourishing the starving. If we are to understand vocation to ministry in the church correctly, we can only do so by taking on the mind of Christ. He did not rely on his equality with God, but made himself as humble as a slave, and submitted even to death for our sake. The pattern of Christ is not one of lily-livered weakness. No one can say that in taking on the religious and political authorities of his day, cleansing the Temple, casting out demons, dealing with the doubts and hesitations of his disciples, that Jesus was not strong. But his strength did not come from relying on the mystique of power or religious charisma. It came from his intimacy with the Father, and from his love of truth. At his trial before Pilate, when he must have been most afraid, he bore witness to the truth.

The current crisis within the church does not demand that all those called to ministry should be saints. We will be, as we have always been, a mixture of saints and sinners. What it does demand is that we disconnect priestly and religious ministry from the false assumption of power. We are called to have the courage to speak the truth. This means opening our ears to those who have been abused, opening our eyes to where we ourselves have colluded or been complacent about the way in which the church is organized. It also

means opening our mouths and proclaiming the truth of the holiness of the church and its members, despite all failings and criticisms. Neither the abusers nor the structures of collusion have the victory here. The crucified and risen Christ has the victory, if we are willing to walk his way. He is the good shepherd, who calls each one of us to be a shepherd in our own turn. Our vocation is to be Good Friday and Easter Sunday shepherds, building a humbler, simpler and more humane church whose structures of governance mirror the loving humility of the suffering servant Jesus.

2nd Reflection following readings from Revelation 7: 9, 14-17, John 10:27-30.

I once read a book in which a shepherd remarked, 'If you want to be a good shepherd, you have to learn to think like a sheep'. This is one of the best descriptions of the Incarnation that I know. Jesus says of his flock, 'I know them'. He knows us because he has been one of us, he knows human life from the inside. He claims an ownership over us that is not a proclamation of power but a promise of kinship – this is why he claims that we will never be lost, and no one can steal us from him, because he is one of our own, one like us. This kinship lies at the heart of his invitation to service.

We live in a culture of entitlement, which has 'I know my rights' as its motto. In contrast to that is the message of those who follow Christ, which asks, 'how can I serve?' This is not just a message for priests and nuns, a spiritual elite, but for the huge number of people from every nation, race, tribe and language, called by their baptism to a universal vocation to holiness. I've worked as a school teacher, a university and prison chaplain, a spiritual director, and among the street children of Brazil. In each of these ministries I learned far more than I ever taught. In the Christian tradition we often speak of evangelization as something we do for others. We 'bring' the Gospel to those who haven't received it. But we forget that ministry is a two-way traffic, and the Good News of Jesus was preached to me by those I served: schoolchildren, colleagues, students, prisoners and, most powerfully, the poor. It was they who taught me the meaning of vocation.

Mary Ward, who founded the Congregation of Jesus 400 years ago, died with her vocation to active ministry for women denied by the very church she loved and longed to serve. Her last words were, 'Cherish God's vocation in you. Let it be constant, efficacious and loving'. If we want to be good shepherds, we need to learn to think and feel like those whom we shepherd. It's a question of entering into and embracing our humanity more deeply, even when that doesn't look particularly holy. It is there that we will find kinship with Christ who shared our humanity, and leads us by a kindly light, so that we might share divine life with him.