

# THE GOOD SHEPHERD

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

THE flock of God has only one shepherd, Christ. He alone is the good shepherd, in the sense of the real, true, genuine shepherd, as opposed to the impostor, the man who is only playing a part. His words, 'I am the good shepherd'<sup>1</sup> exclude the possibility of there being any other shepherd; just as the words, 'I am the Lord your God'<sup>2</sup> exclude the possibility of there being any other God. In the gospel of John, Jesus' use of the phrase, 'I am', has all the solemnity and content of the divine, 'I am', of the Old Testament. On his lips it becomes an assertion of his divine origin and messianic mission.<sup>3</sup> When God spoke that first 'I am' which was to be his sacred name, Yahweh, he proclaimed his divine power as the creator and author of life. In the very name of his transcendence he entered into the history of Israel. Not that he, the provident God, had hitherto been absent; but now he revealed his hidden presence at the very heart of their lives, and invited them to cooperate with him in all that he was to achieve in them and through them. Nomadic herdsmen that they were, the people of Israel soon understood and expressed this intimate relationship between themselves and their God in terms of their daily living. Yahweh was their shepherd, they 'the sheep of his pasturing',<sup>4</sup> whom he led out of Egypt 'like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock'.<sup>5</sup> Their liturgical prayer constantly reminded them, 'we are people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand'.<sup>6</sup>

This theme of the shepherd, which finds its finest expression in Psalm 22, prepares the way for Christ's declaration 'I am the good shepherd'. But he does not merely reiterate it, he transposes it, enriches it with his own unique experience: the experience of the incarnate Son of the eternal Father, obedient in all things to him who sent him. Jesus is the true shepherd because he is Son of God and the saviour; his pastoral task can be fully understood only in the light of the mystery of his person and of the salvation he brings.

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 10, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Exod 20, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Cf A. Feuillet, *Etudes Johanniques*, (Désclée de Brouwer, 1962), pp 80 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Ps 78, 3; 99, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ps 77, 52.

<sup>6</sup> Ps 94, 7.

Risen and glorious, Christ continues to exercise his office as 'the great shepherd of the sheep',<sup>1</sup> through the ministry of his Church. The flock which he entrusted to Peter's care, after his resurrection,<sup>2</sup> are still his sheep. Through the gift of the Spirit the one true Shepherd continues to lead his flock along the way of truth, nourishing them with the food that is himself. All who are of the flock of Christ must submit to this guidance, be they pope, bishop, priest, or laity. Christ is not divided. He stands as the source of all true pastoral effort within the Church and as its ultimate term. Much has been written in recent years about pastoral techniques and their necessity. But pastoral techniques become outdated and need constant revision, just as the interior structure of the Church, designed to facilitate the apostolate, has had to undergo profound modifications in the course of history. Today people are more than ever aware of the danger of making any particular pastoral technique an absolute, indispensable condition for the pasturing of the flock of Christ. We must never become so preoccupied with the design of the sheepfold that we forget Christ who is the only way of access to it. Nor must we be so absorbed with our own particular corner that we are oblivious of what is happening elsewhere within the fold. The Vatican Council, by its pronouncements on the collegiality of the episcopacy, on the priesthood, the diaconate and the laity, is drawing tighter the bonds which unite the whole flock in the unity of the work of the unique pastor. Any apostolate in the Church, if it is to be fruitful and enduring, must draw its inspiration from the mind and heart of the good shepherd who alone can satisfy the flock. A particular pastoral technique will be truly successful only in the measure in which it is energised by the Spirit of 'the shepherd and guardian of souls'.<sup>3</sup>

The flock of God belongs to Christ alone. It is the prerogative of the good shepherd to look at the sheep and say, 'These are mine'. But that word mine, whilst denoting possession, does not primarily derive its force from any juridical claim. In speaking of his pastoral office Christ does not use legalistic terminology, nor does he invoke the analogy of temporal authority; indeed he expressly rejects this.<sup>4</sup> He speaks, instead, of watchful care, of service which goes to the ultimate proof of love – the giving of one's life; he speaks of mutual recognition and of the gift of eternal life. All these ideas are contained in his use of the word mine. Further, Jesus sees the sheep as

<sup>1</sup> Heb 13, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 21, 15–17.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Pet 2, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Cf Lk 22, 25.

the gift of his Father: 'My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one'.<sup>1</sup> Lord of creation though he is, Christ receives as a gift from his Father what he could claim as his own by right. The sheep are the Father's gift to him, and by freely accepting responsibility for them, Christ lives out his obedience to the Father. Hence his use of the word mine expresses his obedience as the incarnate Son of God. That obedience is the human expression of the eternal union of the Son with the Father: the bond which unites him in his earthly life with the Father's will. He and the Father are one in the mystery of his loving obedience whereby he dispossessed himself entirely in order to receive everything from the Father. So for Jesus the word mine turns him at one and the same time towards the sheep who are his flock, and towards the Father whose gift they are. His pastoral task of caring for the sheep is the expression of his union with the Father. He is entirely given to the flock because he is entirely given to his Father. His union with the Father sends him out towards the sheep. If we may so speak, there is no conflict in the life of Christ between his own interior life and his pastoral task. The two are but different aspects of the same reality.

The sheep are a sacred possession, since they are the gift of the Father. As with every gift of God, they form a bond between him who gives and him who receives, drawing the recipient ever closer to the 'giver of all good things'. In giving them to his Son, God expresses his will that all men may be saved; and in his acceptance of his pastoral care, Christ fulfils his saving mission and accomplishes the will of his Father. The sheep are his life, and without them there is no life for him. They are the whole reason for his earthly existence, the *causa suae viae*.<sup>2</sup> How could the Son live without giving himself to the Father? And what in practice is the gift of himself to his Father but the gift of himself to his flock? It is this gift of himself which sustains him, as he insists with his apostles, after his talk with the samaritan woman: 'my food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work'.<sup>3</sup> The gift of his life for the flock is the supreme proof that he alone is the true shepherd; and at the same time, it is his way to the Father. As he goes to his death he can say, 'I go to the Father'.<sup>4</sup> Christ's all-consuming passion to be united with the will of his Father is the salvation of the flock; and in the act of sal-

<sup>1</sup> Jn 10, 29-30.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 4, 34.

<sup>2</sup> Cf *Dies Irae*: *Recordare Jesu pie, quod sum causa tuae viae*.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 14, 28.

vation Christ is with the Father. When he gives himself to be the food of his flock at the last supper, he raises his eyes to the Father in a gesture which expresses his union with the Father. In the eucharist Christ gathers the flock of God into the one fold of the divine life of charity, so that they may know that 'I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you'.<sup>1</sup> The words 'This is my body. Take and eat'<sup>2</sup> will be echoed by his final cry, 'Father into thy hands I commend my spirit'.<sup>3</sup> Jesus' giving of himself to the Father in sacrifice finds its sacramental expression in his becoming the pasture on which the flock feeds. So Christ's rôle as the good shepherd, his finding his Father in the gift of himself to the flock, and his flock through his union with the Father, reveals another dimension of the mystery of Christ. He reveals himself as the meeting place of God and his flock, for his relationship with his flock is their entry into the life of God. The more they are his, the more are they with him in the Father.

Because the sheep are his, Christ knows them. But his knowledge is not merely a thing of the intellect, still less is it the numerical knowledge of a statistician. Jesus does not count his sheep, but he knows each one by name. He knows them in such a way that they have a sense of belonging to him. They follow him when he calls, for they know that with him they are where they belong. The knowledge that Jesus has of his sheep is based on a communion of interest and experience. He goes before them along the way of salvation, becoming the first-born of the dead, the first to know the salvation which they desire; and he knows it only to communicate it. He, the 'prince of pastors',<sup>4</sup> becomes the lamb which is sacrificed, so that the whole flock, scattered far and wide, may be gathered into one fold. His knowledge of the sheep comes from his identifying himself with their interests. Their needs dictate the course of his life and the nature of his work. Furthermore, this knowledge between shepherd and sheep is a mutual presence: they are in him and he in them. For Jesus gives himself to those who know him, and from those whom he knows he asks for the same attitude of trust and self-giving. His sheep follow his voice wherever he leads them, not through any exterior constraint, but because they know from his understanding of them that they can trust him absolutely. Even though that path should lead through 'the valley of darkness'<sup>1</sup> they can follow him

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 14, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 26, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Lk 23, 46.

<sup>4</sup> I Pet 5, 4.

blindly since they know that he would die rather than allow them to come to harm.

Christ speaks of this mutual knowledge of the good shepherd and the sheep in the same breath as he speaks of the knowledge which exists between Father and Son: 'I know mine and mine know me; as the Father knows me and I know the Father'.<sup>2</sup> Here Christ is not holding up the mutual knowledge of Father and Son as a model of the knowledge he has of his sheep. It is rather that this knowledge of Father and Son is the source of the knowledge the shepherd has of his sheep. In the Father who has given the sheep into his charge the Son knows them as his own. His knowledge of the sheep admits them into the intimacy of his relationship with his Father; and the sheep learn to know the Father in their knowledge of the good shepherd: 'Philip, he that has seen me has seen the Father'.<sup>3</sup>

In the gospel of John, we are taught that belief and knowledge are life, 'This is eternal life that they should know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'.<sup>4</sup> The knowledge of the good shepherd is life to the flock. In that communication of himself, which is their knowledge of him, the sheep receive the gift of eternal life: 'My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, those who recognise him in the breaking of bread<sup>6</sup> and eat of the food he puts before them have eternal life: So in word and action the good shepherd communicates his divine life to his flock. His words are eternal life to those who receive them and his food is eternal life to those who eat. In the mass, in the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the eucharist, the good shepherd still communicates to his flock that eternal life, the life in abundance, which he came on earth to give.<sup>7</sup>

This gift of himself, which is the gift of life, is an act of supreme liberty on the part of the good shepherd. Christ insists on this point: 'For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord, I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it again, this charge I have received from my Father'.<sup>1</sup> This laying down of his life, the hallmark of the good shepherd, is also the reason why his Father loves Jesus; for it is an act of love of his Father, the complete, free, giving of himself, which he makes only

<sup>1</sup> Ps 22, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 10, 28.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 10, 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> Lk 24, 30-31.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 14, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Jn 10, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 17, 3.

when everything has been accomplished. The greatest manifestation of his love for the sheep is also the greatest manifestation of his love for his Father, and the revelation of the liberty of the Son of God. This laying down of his life, which seals his claim to be the good shepherd, reveals his complete dedication to his pastoral charge. His care for the sheep is not limited by any conditions, and each provident action towards the sheep expresses this entire gift of himself. He is shepherd not from constraint but willingly, not for what he can get out of it for himself, but in order to give himself.<sup>2</sup> Each decisive point in Christ's life is marked by a free assumption on his part of the responsibility for the sheep, and by the Father's approval. At his baptism, on Thabor, in Gethsemane, and finally in his death and resurrection, Christ's liberty leads him to bind himself more and more closely to his sinful flock, and results each time in his glorification by the Father. So, in the moment of his death, far from escaping from his pastoral responsibility, Jesus seals once and for all his abiding presence in the world as the unique pastor. Risen and glorious, he is more than ever the good shepherd; for he now opens to those who believe in him the eternal fold, where 'death shall be no more',<sup>3</sup> and the sheep shall 'dwell in the house of the Lord for ever'.<sup>4</sup>

The good shepherd is the means of access to the security of the fold. He stands before the flock as an assurance of salvation and a guarantee of security: 'I am the door, if anyone enters by me he shall be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture'.<sup>5</sup> The very meaning of his charge as shepherd is to reassure, to encourage, to seek and save what was lost, to make certain that his sheep shall not want. He is the comfort, the strength, the reviver of the flock. It is he who puts new heart into them, strengthening the weak, healing the sick, binding up the crippled, bringing back the strays, seeking the lost.<sup>6</sup> He does not wield the rod of authority as a club to beat the flock into submission, using it 'with force and harshness'. His authority is a mandate to serve and to bring all to the truth. He does not take the weakness or waywardness of the sheep as a personal affront or as a threat to his authority, but as an occasion for mercy and love. Christ, the door to the sheepfold, stands ever open to all who recognise his voice and respond to his call.

Finally, Christ is the universal shepherd, the light which enlightens every man coming into this world.<sup>7</sup> His fold is not an exclusive

<sup>1</sup> Jn 10, 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> Cf I Pet 5, 2-4.

<sup>3</sup> Apoc, 21 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ps 22, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 10, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Cf Ezek 34, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Jn 1, 9.

club for the few, but the assembly point of all mankind. 'I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock and one shepherd'.<sup>1</sup> He does not rest content with the sheep he has, nor grow complacent about the size of his flock. His gaze goes beyond present accomplishments to the task which lies ahead, searching out those who are harried and scattered. When the need arises, he unhesitatingly leaves those who are safe within the security of the fold in order to look for the lost. Nor does he rest until he finds it and brings it back, rejoicing in the burden which such a rescue imposes upon his own shoulders.<sup>2</sup> It is significant that Jesus reserves his strictures for the negligent shepherds, not for the erring sheep.

Before the true shepherd the sheep are separated from the goats. His presence, and their attitude towards him, is what distinguishes them, just as his own attitude towards them marks him out as the good shepherd. Condemnation is not the result of the application of an arbitrary law, but the consequence of refusing to listen to the voice of the shepherd in order to follow him. The perfection of Christ's own pastoral attitude and activity is the light which reveals to his sheep the exigencies of belonging to his flock. It is not enough for them to be content to remain within the security of the fold, they too must be imbued with the spirit of the good shepherd and desire the salvation of their own kind. Wherever there is want, error, doubt, need of any kind, material or spiritual, there is the good shepherd. The sin of those judged as aliens to the flock is that they have failed to recognise the voice of the shepherd in the accents of human needs and misery. So closely is the true shepherd united to the sheep he came to save that he is present in everyone of them, no matter how wild and unrecognisable.<sup>3</sup> The voice of his truth calls from the very heart of forsaken humanity, and those who are deaf to that appeal are deaf to the voice of the shepherd. Those who refuse to go out, at least in their hearts, to those in need, find themselves far from the way of righteousness along which the good shepherd would lead them. They who are the beneficiaries of the provident care of the good shepherd cannot dissociate themselves from his work. All that they have received is a gift from him which they must be ready to share with others and especially with the lost sheep returned to the fold. The parable of the prodigal son draws a warning picture of the sourness and jealousy which can shrivel the hearts

<sup>1</sup> Jn 10, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Lk 15, 3-7.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Mt 25, 32-45.

of those who pride themselves on the exactitude with which they perform their duty. It is the petulant anger of the elder son which excludes him from the festival banquet, that and nothing else.<sup>1</sup>

The flock of Christ must take their lead from their shepherd. To his sure, true guidance they must respond with an attitude of trusting faith and confidence. His love, proved by the gift of his life, must evoke in them the same readiness to give themselves in love for others. In his power they must find the source of their own strength and the remedy for their weakness. He stands as the unifying source of their life; and in the bond of their mutual charity they must find the supreme expression of their union with the one true pastor. Just as Jesus finds his love for his flock in the love which unites him to the Father, so must they find, in their love of each other, the visible sign of their belonging to the true shepherd. 'By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another'.<sup>2</sup> Their obedience to the shepherd is not the dumb service of slaves but the free acceptance of the exigencies of belonging to the flock of God, whose very existence is the result of the obedience unto death of the beloved Son of the Father. Their obedience must be a sharing in the supreme obedience of the Son of God, which means that they vow themselves to readiness to die so that the unity of the whole flock may be consolidated. Admittedly there will be problems of obedience for those who share in the pastoral work of the ordained priesthood: problems for superiors from refractory subjects, problems too for subjects arising from a misconception on the part of superiors of the idea of christian authority. The good shepherd reveals that the only solution to such difficulties lies in the more complete gift of each to the other in fearless trust and complete love, in the desire that the truth of Christ may prevail.

Belonging to the flock of Christ means committing oneself to a way of life which is hazardous and exigent. Participation in the pastoral task of Christ entails constant vigilance, hard work, readiness to face dangers and to risk one's life. The prize is the assurance of the good shepherd that no one shall snatch us from his hand, and that, following him, we shall receive the crown of glory on the day when the sheep will be gathered to witness the manifestation of their shepherd, when all shall be one flock in the unity of Father, Son, and Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Lk 15, 25-30.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 13, 35.