



## Pastoral Letter for the Fourth Sunday of Eastertide, Good Shepherd Sunday.

My dear people,

It is worthy of note that for us in this country Good Shepherd Sunday falls with good timing, right in the middle of the lambing season. This is a time when not only do we see lambs and sheep appearing in our fields, but we are also treated to an array of TV programmes on

farming, veterinary practices and shepherding in particular. All this gives a good insight into the care that shepherds lavish upon their flocks. They are not just supervising the births, but they go on to make sure there is food and water, also protections from disease, the weather and even predators.

We know that Jesus was not a sheep farmer, though sheep, lambs and shepherds do appear from time to time in his teaching. What we heard in the Gospel was not about animal husbandry, but rather Jesus describing himself with the qualities of a Good Shepherd: one who provides care, nourishment, protection. And in using the image of a shepherd, our Lord is borrowing from the Old Testament, which is peppered with that image, especially applied to prophets and kings – and one king in particular, David. It was he who united the north and south into one kingdom and brought stability and peace. He was the recipient of God's promise that one of his line would prove to be the long-awaited Messiah. We understand that is Jesus. So, to those nurturing qualities of the shepherd: care, nourishment and protection, we can add leadership, even authority.

Our Gospel ended with what some have called Jesus' strapline: 'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.' All this talk about being a Good Shepherd is about life, abundant life, life to the full. Everything that Jesus said and did was life-giving. Even when he was chastising the Scribes and Pharisees and others, it was so that they might change and truly live. That aspect of Jesus ministry of Good Shepherd, lives on in those he has called, and is calling to be priests, to be shepherds of the Lord's flock. So, it is not coincidental that today is designated as the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, it springs right out of the Gospel.

I would like now to address these words to those single men present among us:

St John Henry Newman affirms eloquently for all Christians that God has a plan for us: *"God has created me to do him some definite service. He has committed some work to me, which he hasn't committed to another. I have my mission."* Ask yourself: what is my 'definite service'? What is my 'mission', committed to me by God? Is God calling you to be a priest? Amid the noise of life, the designs and opportunities open to you, be courageous and reflect: What does God want from me? When the Apostles first encountered Jesus, He did not explain why he had chosen them, or what he had in store for them. He simply said, "Follow me!" and they did. Perhaps, as you hear this, you are already thinking "No, this couldn't possibly be for me". As your Bishop, I can tell you: we all feel unworthy in our call from God. This is especially the case when we reflect that the Good Shepherd Himself may be asking us to share in his work as shepherds of His flock. Put yourself in God's hands and let him lead you. Allow the question of becoming a priest be asked of you; meditate on it, give that process of discernment an opportunity to grow. When you come to the moment of receiving Holy Communion at Mass today – and every time you go to Mass – ask the Lord Jesus: what do you want from me?

If any of these words strike you, I invite you to join me at Lancaster Cathedral, along with others from across our diocese, at the next 'Day for Discerning Vocation to the Priesthood': Saturday 30 May beginning with Mass at 12.15pm. I look forward to joining you for lunch and the opportunity to talk and reflect together.

To all of you present I ask you: pray for vocations to the priesthood! And pray for your priests! This is so important. Also important is to promote a culture of vocations. We do this by talking positively about the priestly vocation, even suggesting it to someone whom God has placed in your path. We can be people who are full of encouragement. This year, please God, we shall have one ordination to the priesthood which will leave us with one student to complete his training. Some good news is that in September we shall have five men embarking on their journey of discernment, mostly at the English College in Spain. This news encourages us and prompts us to prayer.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, it would not go amiss to offer a prayer of thanksgiving for those priests that God has sent your way both now and in the past.

With my blessing,

+Rt Rev Paul Swarbrick

**Bishop of Lancaster**