

We are the people of God's pasture, and the sheep of his hand. (Ps 95)

A line of the psalm that the choir interpreted for us just now with such insight and artistry. Since today is the feast of St Cecilia, the patroness of musicians, I am privileged to have the opportunity to express what I know is the appreciation of the whole cathedral community for the beauty and dignity that our musicians bring to our worship.

When I was growing up in my native New Zealand, it was estimated that there were twenty sheep per person in the population. If you were out for a drive in the country, you would often find your car suddenly immersed in a woolly froth of several hundred merino fleeces. Watching the farmer and his dogs trying to shepherd an uncooperative flock safely past a stationary car, I remember being a little miffed that God apparently compares us to such stupid animals!

I think now that the comparison is more about the shepherd than the sheep. When the people of Israel thought of God as their king, the image of a shepherd came naturally to them. In the Ancient Mediterranean world, kings were expected to be shepherds of their people: ensuring food security and safety from predators. Even the Roman Emperor Tiberius, who reigned during Jesus' lifetime, fancied himself as a shepherd and expected his representatives to act accordingly. It is on record that he turned down a request from a provincial governor for permission to impose a tax hike by telling him that a good shepherd shears his sheep; he doesn't skin them (Suetonius, *Tib.* 32).

Our first reading from the prophet Ezekiel portrays God as a gentle shepherd: searching for the strays, finding good grazing near flowing streams, bandaging injured limbs, taking special care of the weak. All very Psalm 23! Did it strike you, though, how suddenly this idyllic scene is interrupted by the clash of head-butting sheep, big strong rams using their impressive horns to attack frail sheep and the shepherd having to step in to challenge the aggressors and defend their victims, or as Ezekiel puts it, to 'judge between sheep and sheep.'

So being a shepherd-king involved being a judge. The Israelite understanding of kingship set great store on this aspect of a king's role. We find God being addressed as a judge all over the psalms, many of which are like the petitions that ancient people would write to their king, begging him to hear their case: protesting their innocence when falsely accused or claiming restitution when treated unfairly.

All of this is, I think, a helpful background to our gospel reading. It is a judgement scenario built around what was probably a parable that Jesus told about a king who went around his kingdom incognito to see how people would treat him. And then, when he revealed his true identity, he judged them on what they had done for him or what they had failed to do, with rather surprising outcomes. In the parable, the king does exactly what a shepherd would do. In ancient Israel, families who had sheep would also keep a few goats, mainly for their milk. The sheep and goats typically grazed together during the day. But a shepherd would separate them at night because goats needed shelter to be kept warm, while sheep preferred the open air. The major downside of grazing goats was that, unless they were controlled, they could destroy the vegetation of an area, ruining crops and even halting the regrowth of forests. So people tended to take rather a dim view of goats, as potential pests. They valued sheep more highly, especially because of their wool which was the most common material for making clothes.

When we listen to this judgement scene where the shepherd-king separates the sheep from the goats, we might expect that it would be Jesus' faithful followers who are set on his right and who hear the words, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you...' But if we listen carefully, we find that this is not necessarily the case. Matthew envisages 'All the nations' coming before the judge. His audience would have taken this to mean all the Gentiles. Earlier in the

gospel, there is another judgement scenario. Jesus says that when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, his apostles will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28). Today's gospel is significantly different. It is not Israel that is being judged, but foreigners.

First century Jews believed that at the end of time there would be two judgements: Israel would be judged first and then all the other nations. St Paul takes this as a given when he writes that at the end of time...

There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and then the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and then the Greek. (Rom 2:9-10. See also 1 Pet 4:17)

By 'the Greek,' Paul meant non-Jews, that is, Gentiles. It is important to keep in mind that in the ancient world religion was an essential part of a nation's identity. So, it was taken for granted that nations other than Israel would be worshippers of their own gods. This increases the impact--or even the surprise element--when the king in today's gospel addresses people from 'all the nations' as 'you that are blessed by my Father' and welcomes them to inherit the kingdom.

Even though there was respect for righteous Gentiles among first century Jews, there would have been quite a few people listening to Jesus who would have presumed that since they were 'the sheep of God's flock,' the goats must surely represent foreigners. So, this judgment scene turns out to be just as challenging as something Jesus' said earlier in Matthew's gospel. Remember the centurion who said, 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof...'? Having raised a few eyebrows by praising the great faith of this officer of the occupying force, Jesus had something even more provocative to say: 'Many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness...' (Matt 8:11-12).

Surely there is an important message for us today. Our king tells people that we would think of as outsiders-- 'not one of us'—that they gave him food when he was hungry, that they looked after him when he was sick, and visited him when he was in prison. They are amazed because, most likely, they have never even heard of him, let alone met him! Isn't there is a call here for us Christians to recognize the goodness in people of every nation and every religion?

Think of the high proportion of the people looking after those who are sick here in Ireland at the moment who come from different nations and belong to different faiths to ours. Think of the care for others that Hindus, Jains and Sikhs demonstrated recently when they found inventive, socially-distanced ways to celebrate the festival of Diwali. Surely today's gospel is speaking to us of God's blessing on all the people of different faiths, or of no particular faith, who are front line workers, who are literally putting their lives on the line for others by risking infection: doctors, nurses, pharmacists, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caretakers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, ministers of religion....

That list is borrowed from the letter about fraternity and social friendship that a great Christian leader of our time, Pope Francis, released last month (*Fratelli Tutti*, 54). In writing it he says that he 'felt particularly encouraged' by the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, with whom he met in Abu Dhabi, where they both made a declaration that "God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters".

To conclude, I will borrow again from Pope Francis, this time from the Prayer to the Creator that he offers at the end of his letter, a prayer sensitively worded in the hope that people of any religion might be happy to join in it:

May our hearts be open to all the peoples and nations of the earth.

May we recognize the goodness and beauty that you have sown in each of us,
and thus forge bonds of unity, common projects, and shared dreams.

Amen.