

## Reflection for 21<sup>st</sup> July (Trinity 8)

We have all seen the idealised pictures of sheep and shepherds which appear in paintings and stained-glass windows – white fluffy sheep and spotlessly clean cuddly lambs in the care of smart-looking men in pleasant green fields. It all looks idyllic, but unfortunately it is far removed from the truth about what it was like to be a shepherd in biblical Israel. It was a tough, dirty and exhausting job. It was also a dangerous one, which required constant vigilance against wolves – sometimes even fighting them off. Even at night the shepherd had to be vigilant, sleeping at the door of the sheepfold, being prepared for anything.

It was not even a highly respected job, partly because shepherds were known to be dirty and dishevelled, and partly because the nature of their work made it impossible for them to keep the rules of Jewish religious observance: this rendered them ritually as well as physically unclean. Yet the title of shepherd became one of the traditional titles for a king in ancient Israel, and occurs repeatedly in the words of the prophets. But not all those who wielded authority were good or praiseworthy. With leadership comes power, and the greater the power the greater the responsibility – and the greater the responsibility the greater the temptation to use power for selfish ends.

Hence the words of Jeremiah in today's reading: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" His message was that the leaders had failed the people, and God would punish them. Just because you're a leader doesn't mean God is biased in your favour.

God *is* biased in favour of well-being for everyone – for all his creation. Therefore, he will not leave his people bereft of leadership – he assures them that he will raise up new, good leaders, so that the people need no longer live in fear. He will make all things new.

In every era, we need good leaders, to lead us on the better things, to open our eyes to new possibilities, to create a climate of trust and security for all – in other words, to care for us. As a good shepherd cares for his sheep, so a good leader improves the means by which people are cared for – especially the most vulnerable. The qualities of good leadership are perhaps summed up in the four words that are engraved on the mace which the late Queen Elizabeth presented to the people of Scotland at the opening of the Scottish Parliament: Justice, Wisdom, Compassion, Integrity. They are all words that appear constantly in the Bible in the context of leadership.