

The Shepherd, the Bible & the Baptised

a sermon preached on the

4th Sunday of Easter

13 April 2008

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

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Lections: Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

On Friday the Archbishop of Perth announced that on the Feast of Corpus Christi ¹ he intends to ordain to the order of bishop a woman priest. ² God willing, Kay Goldsworthy will thus become the first woman bishop in the Anglican Church of Australia. Not surprisingly, a great many people are tremendously encouraged by this development. As a former banner-waver for the Movement for the Ordination of Women I am, of course, delighted. Equally unsurprisingly, however, there are others for whom this development represents a great scandal.

For the fact is that there remain many Christians whose faith structure depends on a firm commitment to what is generally known as the 'headship' of the man in the household. ³ There is a small collection of Biblical texts on which this philosophical commitment depends. Indeed, the First Letter of Peter, which we are reading during Eastertide in this Year A, gives us one of those texts. In the same letter in which Peter calls the baptised into faithfulness to Christ the living stone, and in that great baptismal teaching describes the baptised as a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into marvellous light," ⁴ he also has some very explicit instructions as to how, in practical terms, the baptised are to live that faith.

Leaving aside, for today, Peter's advice regarding submission to emperors and slave-masters, even cruel ones, ⁵ he wrote this (in)famous counsel: "Wives, in the same way [as Christ], accept the authority of your husbands."⁶ We should not underestimate the immensity of the dilemma that this text poses for those whose self-understanding and self-description is 'simple Bible believers', those who claim to hold to a 'literal interpretation of Scripture'. You see, a lack of faithfulness to the literal meaning of this text is just the thin end of the wedge. Ignore *this* instruction, and before you know it all manner of apostasy will follow.

It is not surprising, I suppose, if utterly inexcusable, that those whose identity is shaped by this philosophical stance regarding Biblical interpretation can sometimes say and do such dreadful things. According to the logic of such a position, a bishop who ordains a woman a priest, let alone a bishop, is undermining the entire Biblical edifice. This is essentially the same logic that lies behind statements by the group calling itself 'Mainstream' when it insists on the necessity of upholding "Biblically sanctioned expressions of sexuality."⁷ There is, of course, a little landmine of a text in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles which will derail

¹ Thursday 22 May 2008

² ABC News 'Australia's First Female Bishop to be Consecrated, Friday 11 April 2008, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/04/11/2214261.htm>

³ Ephesians 5:23 "For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is head of the church."

⁴ 1 Peter 2:4, 9

⁵ 1 Peter 2:13-14, 18

⁶ 1 Peter 3:1

⁷ 'An Open Letter on Same Sex Relationships' to Bishop David Coles, 18 March 2005, from Anglican Mainstream NZ, signed by 22 priests of the Diocese of Christchurch.

all such self-confidence: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”⁸

Nevertheless, we should not be naïve about this - everything is at stake! The problem is immense, from this point of view, because it seems like an attack on everything that ‘has always been taught’.⁹ From this point of view, the ordaining of a woman to the episcopate amounts to an attack on the Bible. And thus such church leaders who would do this are false shepherds, like thieves and bandits,¹⁰ who must be denounced in the strongest possible terms. See the problem? Good Shepherd Sunday alerts us to the complex and problematic relationship between *the* Good Shepherd - the eternally-present resurrected Christ who is one with the Father – the texts of the Bible, and those mere mortals who are called to shepherd the community of faith by the interpretation of Scripture.

Now honesty compels us to admit that we cannot know for sure what is right. We would have to admit that, because we cannot see all the truth, it is possible that the ordaining of a woman as bishop might be wrong, in the sense that it might represent unfaithfulness to the Bible. The decision made by this Diocese’s Electoral College to elect a woman as our bishop, therefore, sharpens the question somewhat for us here in Christchurch. Of course it is also possible that ordaining homosexual persons, the outlawing of slavery, the decriminalisation of prostitution, the conferring of political and property rights to women, indeed, the democratic process itself, undermining as it does the ‘divine right of Kings’, could also conceivably represent unfaithfulness to Bible teachings. After all, the Bible seems to say very explicit things on all these subjects, and the church as taught such things “down through the years”.

So what is there to do? In our attempts to live our faith how do we know for sure if we are being faithful to the Good Shepherd? How do we negotiate the subtle and complex terrain between faithfulness to the Bible, religious leadership, and faithfulness to the Good Shepherd?

In grappling with this it is critical to appreciate that chapter 10 of John’s gospel records Jesus’ immediate response to the incident, in chapter 9, in which he is in fierce dispute with religious authorities in the Temple. He has healed the man born blind, and they are outraged because he has failed to observe faithfulness to the Sabbath.¹¹ That is to say, Jesus, in their opinion, has violated the Torah. In Christian terms, he has violated the ‘Bible’. Thus, to those religious leaders Jesus is a counterfeit shepherd, leading people astray. Clearly, there has always been a terrible tension between faithfulness to received texts and faithfulness to the God who inspired them.

The Bible does not rescue us from the inevitable dilemmas which will be faced by successive future generations not sharing in the assumptions of those who wrote its texts. While the Bible does not rescue us from having to work things out in our own time, what it does do, however, is testify to the *character*, the ‘signature’, one might say, of the good shepherd – and then leave us to discern the difference between thieves who break in and steal, and those who bear the signature of One who is the gate for the sheep. The Good Shepherd declares that whereas the false shepherds steal and kill and destroy, he knows his own and his own know him, and that he came: “that [the sheep] may have life, and have it abundantly... The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... in order that there will be one flock and one shepherd.”¹²

That is to say, the good shepherd does not coerce or grasp at power – but out of love freely lays down his life.¹³ The good shepherd does not limit or constrain life – but enables life to be experienced more fully, indeed into abundant fullness. The good shepherd does not make a ghetto for the religiously-pure – but draws all peoples to himself,¹⁴ lifting up the whole creation. The baptised person is called not to *believe in* a Bible, but to follow a shepherd, the Good One.¹⁵

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⁸ Acts 2:44-5

⁹ Interviewed on the matter of homosexuality and ordination, for instance, Archbishop of Sydney Peter Jensen stated that he was most concerned for those faithful church persons “who are now being sent very confusing and mixed messages *as though what we’ve taught down through the years is no longer true.*” (emphasis added) Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ‘Anglican Archbishop says church no longer the same’, *Lateline*, 3 November 2003. Transcript at www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2003/s981506.htm

¹⁰ John 10:1

¹¹ John 9:1-41; “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.” 9:16

¹² John 10:14, 10, 11, 16

¹³ John 10:11, 18; 15:13

¹⁴ John 12:32

¹⁵ John 10:11 **Εγω ειμι ο ποιμην ο καλος** ‘I am the shepherd, the good one.’