

SERMON FOR EASTER 4 | 22.04.18

How many of us have actually met a shepherd?! I guess the nearest most of us have got to one are those occasions on holiday when the road has been blocked by a flock of sheep and we have had to patiently wait until they passed. Or perhaps watching 'One man and his dog' on TV when a dog will manage to get a flock of sheep into a distant pen with just a series of whistles from the shepherd.

Jesus' use of the shepherd image to describe himself was pretty relevant in 1st century Palestine when he needed images to describe the way God cared for people in general - and Jesus cared for all those he met in particular. It is the archetypal symbol of the person who goes to extreme lengths to protect those who might be thought of as dependents.

As we look forward to the installation of a new bishop of London in three week's time, this seems like a good opportunity to ask some questions about how we come to have such things, what their role is and how they fit into a Church in the 21st century? And, in parallel - as we look to building a closer relationship with the Methodist community in this country, a Church which does not have bishops - we ask whether the ancient tradition of bishops, priests and deacons being linked in a continuous chain from the first apostles is really of any significance.

And of that isn't enough, we also ask what difference it will make that the new bishop, Sarah Mullally is a woman. Will that have implications for our unity with the Roman Catholic community?

So let's start at the very beginning: some would say that the first apostles, Peter, James, John and co., gathered together in the Upper Room at Pentecost, were the first bishops. That was when the Holy Spirit came rushing down 'as tongues of flame' and could be thought of as their ordination to this senior role in the Church, the men who then went off to found churches throughout the known world from Rome to Hippo. If only it was that easy!

If we read the New Testament carefully, and also the other letters written by the first and second generation of Church leaders into the beginning of the second century, there was no one pattern of local church leadership. The word for church oversight - episcopo - from which get the word *episcopal* relating to bishops - also seems to have been used about priests. It wasn't until the middle of the 2nd century that the three roles of bishop, priest and deacon seems to have been agreed under the influence of the great teaching bishop, Ignatius of Antioch.

From then on it was the bishops who looked after a territory containing a series of smaller church communities, run locally by priests – while the deacons looked after the sick and made sure Church buildings were all in order. In time this got even more complicated with some bishops becoming more senior than others – hence Archbishops and in the west, the Pope himself.

And the role of bishops seems, from what we can tell, to have been mostly about teaching – helping the infant church to work out exactly what was to be taught in the Churches – for example clamping down against those who wanted to say that Jesus was not a man at all, or that he had a split personality – or that he was just a man with a great charisma. Different churches would be set up in the major towns and cities with rival bishops trying to persuade the locals that their version of the truth was most kosher. Verbal battles often got out of hand and after some fisticuffs, great Councils of bishops would be convened to sort matters out. And to stop false teaching the bishop was the only one with the authority to ordain new priests.

Despite the Reformation when the Church in England refused to accept the authority of the Pope in Rome, that pattern of bishops, priests and deacons was maintained. There are 44 Anglican Dioceses in England and each has one or more bishops, charged with teaching the faith and selecting and ordaining new priests.

So, you may ask, what has happened to the role of shepherd – the one who knows all their sheep and goes after the 1:100 who gets lost? Good question! Because these days the bishop is generally not known by their flock – and in London, barely by the priests either! I met the last bishop of London only once in his house in eight years, and only then when two members of the congregation here complained about me! I meet Bishop Adrian the area bishop a bit more often, but I can't say I know him as I don't get involved with church committees if I can possibly help it.

So what use are bishops? I think we Anglicans are remarkably fortunate that our bishops are generally much more high profile than the leaders of other churches. Many of them have specialist knowledge in all kinds of areas – ethics, education, environmental issues – you name it. They have access to the media and they use their status in a much wider arena than an ordinary parish priest would be involved with. Many write books; they discuss issues with the great and the good, and the majority have national and international roles which are actually vital if the Gospel is going to be heard by the world at large, and not just inside our churches.

If there is a national tragedy the local bishop will be there: Graham Tomlin, area bishop of Kensington, was very visible when the Grenfell Tower tragedy was unfolding. He is a very good thing in general and he spoke with great compassion as well as great fluency to the TV cameras gathered from all over the world. Best of all he was able to talk about the God-dimension, even in that terrible situation, in a way that made people sit up and think.

But does that make bishops essential to the way we are a Church? As we said earlier, the Methodists don't have them and, like some Lutherans and other Protestant groups, are likely to point to the Early Church and remind us that the bishop-priest-deacon structure wasn't settled for at least a hundred and fifty years after the Ascension.

But I think there is also a real difference between, say, a Methodist leader and a bishop. A Methodist District Chairman is there to make sure their churches work as effectively as possible, paying their bills and reaching out in mission. But they have no role in teaching or defining what can be taught in Church. Each time I start a new role as a parish priest, I have to swear canonical obedience to the Diocesan bishop. In this role I speak for him and for the whole Church. So one of his jobs is to set limits to the theological band-width in which clergy speak and I am not free to say whatever what I like. And that is quite right and proper.

But that leads me to this observation: because I get the feeling that most of our bishops are, actually, more engaged in administration than in teaching. Bishop Adrian, our area bishop, has just finished chairing a committee looking at the way our Cathedrals are run – and, poor man, the report has got a very rough ride. But in a sense this was really a bit of Church navel-gazing. Is that what he is there for? I really don't think so.

And what about the appointment of Sarah Mullally as the new bishop of London. Will it make a difference that she is a woman? Undeniably the answer has to be yes. If the bishop is the centre of unity in a Diocese – and there are still some who do not accept the ability of women to be ordained - isn't there a gap between her and at least some in her Diocese? Equally, won't it makes relations with the Roman Catholic Church even more difficult? Again the answer may be yes.

But I also think we have to have the courage of our convictions. Because surely the role of a bishop is to be beacon of hope and a voice in the wilderness.

Actually it seems to me that the appointment of Sarah is as exciting and as necessary a sign of God's intentions as was the calling of the black Bishop of Birmingham to become Archbishop of York in 2005. At last women have someone to look to as a source of inspiration for what they are doing – just as the ethnic minorities are able to look to John Sentamu.

Whatever the theory, I think that true Apostolic Succession has less to do with an actual chain of authority being passed down, generation to generation, than about credibility and visibility. Sarah and John, and indeed all bishops, are called so *that the world may believe*. Their access to the movers and shakers of our society, their ability to get good advice so that they can talk with real knowledge about homelessness, euthanasia, housing, street crime – name your issue – is only relevant when they can also reveal how these issues inter-relate with God's plans for his world today. If we need a justification for quality, articulate bishops, surely that is it.

You probably know that the Latin title adopted by Popes to describe their ministry throughout history has been the word 'Pontifex'. It means bridge builder and it is an image behind today's Gradual hymn *Let us build a bridge together* which I first heard at a Youth Mass in about 1993. The song made an immediate impact on me – and on the 2000 young people who packed Wurtzburg Cathedral that afternoon.

And it takes this question about bishops to the next stage which is: what does all this have to do with us? After all, none of us here are likely to become bishops!

My answer, for what is worth, runs like this. We need leaders who act as role models – preaching the faith inherited from the apostles, building bridges and acting as good shepherds to the weary and to the lost.

But the Gospel teaches us that this is the calling of all of us too. It is so easy to get sucked in to the work of 'keeping the show on the road'; how easy it is to allow Church admin to eat up time and absorb our energies. But that is not what Jesus did and it shouldn't be what any of his disciples are about either.

Because the purpose of bishops and all leaders in the Church has to be tied to this phrase in today's Gospel: *I know my own and my own know me: and I lay down my life for my sheep*. That is the sacrificial quality I am looking for in any bishop (male or female). It is what makes for a living, authentic apostolic succession. It also happens to be what makes for the very best kind of shepherd too.