



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title:

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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Acts 13:15-16, 26-33

Second Reading Revelation 7:9-17

Gospel John 10:22-30

We modern 21st Century types tend to be uncomfortable with the images of 'sheep', 'flock' and 'Shepherd' which figure so prominently in today's readings. Given the cultural emphasis on such things as 'individuality', 'creativity', 'independence', 'self-esteem' etc., it is easy to understand why this might be the case. At the most basic level, being identified with an animal that is anything but independent-minded, remarkably stupid, in fact, and smelly, to boot, just doesn't fit the self-image we aspire to. Of course, when I scan the morning papers' accounts of the latest idiocies, inanities and assorted atrocities humankind has afflicted on itself, images come to my mind which run more in the direction of rodents, swine, and various orders of reptiles, and being likened to sheep does not strike me as all that bad!

But it's not, I think, the animal per se that most offends the modern 21st century type; rather it's the idea that today's individual needs some sort of a Shepherd in the first place: Shepherds 'herd' sheep, after all, and what that says about us is that we are not so independent as we like to believe. Current wisdom has it that we are beyond the stage in human history where all-knowing Leaders lord it over the obedient, herd-like masses. Modern individuals are quite capable of making their own choices in all matters, thank you very much, and definitely NOT in need of a "Leader" or "Shepherd" to tell them what to do. We forge our own paths, we do not follow those laid out for us.

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This message is reflected everywhere. I don't know the last time you picked up a school brochure, for example – I've had to read a lot of these in my job. I swear there isn't a school today that doesn't promise to make impressive leaders of our young ones, independent agents in the business of life, critical thinkers capable of making their own decisions, creative problem solvers etc. etc. etc. And I can guarantee you that in no school's prospectus will you find a promise to make a good and obedient follower out of your child! Heaven forbid! All our children, according to most of the literature available, will be leaders of one sort or another someday, provided, of course, that we educators do our job properly.

Of course it doesn't work that way. Most of us don't grow up to be 'leaders' except, perhaps as part of a hierarchy or chain of command. But more importantly, I think, this image of ourselves as totally independent and autonomous, ignores a certain basic truth about the 'human animal' - namely, that we DO have a strong 'herd' instinct: we want very much, at some level, to 'belong' to a group or herd of other humans, even as leaders. Consider that even our desire to be different reflects this need to belong to some group: in this case, the group of those who are different. Take, for example, the mythical decade of the sixties. It was, as you will remember, the age of the hippie, of radical individualism, of 'doing your own thing', and so forth. Strange thing was, though, that the more people got into doing their own thing, the more they began to look and behave alike. Before you knew it, it became both easy to spot a hippie and hard to tell hippies apart – as sure a sign of 'herdsmanhip' as I can think of.. No one 'forced' anyone into a mold here, it just happened – that is until our entrepreneurial class got into the act and began marketing the 'hippie' look, then it became fashionable – and fashion is a form of social coercion albeit a very gentle one. And so it has been ever since. Today we witness each successive generation of teen-agers striking out on a sort of pre-packaged rebellion against convention, a search for self-expression, and independence that has been carefully crafted on the drawing boards of any number of businesses and corporations.

But it is certainly not only our youth who display this 'herd' instinct – indeed, they are only following in their elders' footsteps. For we "grown-ups" are certainly no less herd oriented than our offspring, though we are loathe to admit it. Moreover, precisely because we try to deny it, we are also far more susceptible to subtle forms of control

and manipulation than we like to think. Politicians know this very well, which is why they have by and large abandoned substantive discussion of issues and turned to sound bites and emotion-laden symbols which engage, in the end, not our “critical thinking skills” but rather our underlying need to ‘belong’ – to be followers, in other words.

The problem here is not that we have this herd-instinct, that we want to belong, to identify – that, as I’ve said is part of being human. The problem arises when we deny that fact and pretend to be completely autonomous and independent agents, for it is at that point that we open ourselves to manipulation by all sorts of forces and powers. The choice before us then, really is not whether to belong to a herd or not, it is which herd to belong to; not whether or not to follow, but whom to follow. It is only when we recognize our need to be part of something and to be led that we can make such a choice – and it is precisely that choice that liberates us from the manipulative forces in our environment and establishes us as individuals.

We who gather here this morning have presumably made such a choice. In our opening collect we prayed: “O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads;” We have, at least in theory, rejected the illusions of autonomy that the world out there promises, and accepted our status as sheep in need of a Shepherd.

It is a move resisted by many, precisely because it demands of us that we abandon the image of ourselves as eagles rather than sheep, as leaders rather than followers. Once we respond to His call though, we come to realize that those categories are not what interest our Shepherd at all: He is not calling us to be either leaders or followers, either eagles or sheep, but simply to be who we are, to be fully human in the context of a community that is unlike any other, one where the words “follow” and “lead” are both interpreted a synonymous with “love”, a flock whose Shepherd is a Lamb.

This morning, we will be welcoming two new sheep to our fold. It is important that we understand the responsibility we are assuming here, and by “we” I mean not only the parents and sponsors of these children, but all of us “sheep”. For we will be renewing our commitment to be a community in which our Shepherd’s presence is clearly reflected in our common life. They will be able to keep the promises made today in

their name only if they see those promises lived out around them and in such a way as to expose the illusory nature of the values they will be tempted by the world "out there" to espouse.

Of course, no matter what we do, their journey will probably be as rocky as most of ours have been: there is no guarantee that they will not stray, that they will not be at least temporarily beguiled by the false promises of the world. But if during their formative years they are lucky enough to experience the real presence of Christ in the concrete communities of family and church, that voice will always be there, somewhere no matter how far they stray, and at some point, when the falseness of the alternatives becomes apparent to them, they will hear Him calling them by name and turn once again to Him.

It is the job of all of us to provide them with that foundation.

The Rite of Holy Baptism we are about to celebrate provides us with a timely reminder of the promises that were made in our own name at our baptism, and with an excellent summary of the principles by which we are committed to live our lives. Doubtless, recalling some of the promises and principles will make us wince. We are, after all, pilgrim community, and as such, an imperfect one: we strive to follow where Jesus leads, but we certainly haven't arrived at our final destination. None of us can claim to have perfectly fulfilled those promises, or the many we have made since then. But let us not be put off by that but take it rather as a challenge, since we have a good Shepherd, who has promised that once we are joined to His flock we are His forever. "No one," he declares in today's gospel, "will snatch them out of my hands." Let us then take up the challenge with confidence and good cheer in the assurance that our Shepherd is determined that we should not fail.