

Shepherds for today

In many areas of life there is a crisis of authority. The simple fact of holding a leadership position no longer ensures loyalty and unquestioning obedience today. The ideal leader is one who can win respect and generate trust, one with a clear sense of responsibility, who can get things done while respecting people's dignity and feelings. Shepherds, into today's readings, are people of integrity who care for others (Jeremiah); people who help us follow the right path (Psalm), and show compassion toward others in their weakness (Gospel).

Some might think of the shepherd image as applying only to bishops — the official “pastors” in succession to the apostles, or to the local pastors in the parish —but in fact the shepherd role at one level or another, applies to all kinds of leadership. We are invited today by God's word to examine what our own leadership is like.

The shepherds condemned by Jeremiah were the leaders who neglected their responsibilities and let abuses thrive. His message today might be to political figures, ministers, and government officials at all levels, who have the task of keeping public order, defending the rights of citizens, and promoting fairness for all, insofar as possible. The shepherd image suggests that authority is not mainly the power to impose rules. The shepherding role is one of service more than dominion. Its goal is to set a good direction and enable a community to live together in peace, where each individual has dignity and an equal chance of personal fulfillment.

While the term shepherd rightly applies to spiritual leaders, prelates can sometimes push the image too far, seeming to treat their people more like sheep to be driven than as intelligent human beings to be persuaded. In today's world, the “Father knows best” attitude is not well received. As pope Francis so effectively points out, our clergy cannot rule by formal decree but must try to win minds and hearts, and communicate an inspiring vision, suited to our times. They must trust the maturity of their people and promote a sense of owning the Church we belong to.

Besides the official leaders of Church and State, many others must offer pastoral leadership at a local and domestic level. Parents and teachers are the most obvious examples of this. In practice it is they who help to develop a child's character, laying the foundations for growth into adult maturity. They pass on values by which young people can live, and foster qualities that can grow over the years. For this they need the sensitivity and compassion shown by Jesus in today's Gospel. “He had compassion for them and began to teach them many things.”