

Bishop Fredrik Modéus' Address in Växjö Cathedral 19 April 2015 when, following his consecration at Uppsala, he was formerly welcomed to his diocese.

Gospel Reading for The Third Sunday of Easter : John 10:1-10.



Photo: Magnus Aronson/IKON

Pictures of God as shepherd and people as the shepherd's flock are common in the Bible. This can be interpreted in many ways. For me, existentially, it comes close when I think of periods when life has been painful and it has been hard to find a sense of direction. When I felt lost and the questions of life have tumbled around in my heart: What in fact is the meaning of my time on earth? How shall I shape my life? What course shall I choose?

Some of you have heard the recently deceased poet Tomas Tranströmer's words: *In the middle of the forest there is a glade that can only be found by someone who has lost his way.* Possibly, this picture can be easier to identify with than the picture of the shepherd and the flock. For, to be honest, it can feel a little so so [demeaning] as an adult to be likened to a straying sheep, not least bearing in mind that, anatomically speaking, the sheep is an animal of very little brain. Thus, the picture language doesn't sit well in an age where we would prefer to emphasise the freedom of the individual and the ability to shape life independently. More simply: if the message is that you have something wrong in your head, but that something can be done about it, we soon stop listening.

Though there does seem to be such an authoritarian strain in the world of religion. We see it in both history and the present. Strong leaders who step forward with arrogant claims to have the answer – and with that the right to do anything whatsoever with the poor sheep who think otherwise. We call it religious fundamentalism and look fearfully at what is happening in the world around us, far away, but also quite near. Traces of authoritarian religiosity are everywhere. It is the task of the church, together with all good powers to stand up for and defend tolerance, variety and openness. I believe that it is more important than ever [to have] a religiosity which is clear without being judgemental. It must be possible to be whole-hearted without being cocksure. A safe identity with deep roots makes us open to the other, without betraying our own [convictions]. Just think if that could, more and more, be the picture of the church in our diocese: people who are bearers of a Christian confession which is joyfully confident and rock-solid faithful to Christ – and at the same time very humble. We must be able to rejoice in our confession without demanding uniformity in the ranks [*rättning i ledet = an allusion to the military lining-up – 'right dress' etc*]. Humans have in fact lived on this earth for quite a long time, I venture to suggest, and died with the great questions of life on their lips – but also with that reliance on God that can begin to sprout when I dare to see how small I am.

This is thus connected with the 'going astray' theme. The Good Shepherd is not necessary if I can just about manage by myself. The life-interpreting answers echo so hollowly if they don't hook onto the 'going astray' questions: What is the meaning of my time on earth? How shall I shape my life? What course shall I choose?

I sometimes think that the church is a place, not for the sheep-like, but for us normal, lost people who seek the warming sunlight in life's glades.

A place for all who rightly expect to be able to encounter a credible interpretation of what it is to be human – and to get this in the light of the Easter gospel of the Risen One. And all of it is clearly also relevant to us who have special responsibility in the church. For a priest, deacon or an elected representative [to a church body] too can go astray. Even a bishop, who walks with the shepherd's crook. That is why there are 'glades of grace'.

The new pope Francis likens the church to a field hospital after a battle. We don't ask someone who is seriously wounded if his cholesterol level is too high. You don't wonder how often he exercises or goes to Friskis och Sveltis [the name of a well-known gym chain]. We bandage the wound. The church should therefore, continues the pope, be like a tender mother, not a hierarchical organisation with border guards meticulously inspecting the quality of people's faith.

What does that say to us? That the gospel is embodied when Christians resist power and consistently stand on the side of the weak. That pastoral care is more than an optional extra to add to a torrent of beautiful words. And that inspiration comes from the Good Shepherd who lifts up the trembling little lamb in you and me in his arms.

For me, the strongest words in today's gospel text are a detail one can easily miss. Jesus says that the shepherd calls for his sheep *by their names*. We know how important it is to be remembered and addressed by name. Hello Maria! Welcome Sten-Inge! Great to see you Thomas! And we know how much it hurts when someone we meet seems to have forgotten who we are. Or, with a slightly more amusing touch, as a journalist said to me some time ago: welcome as bishop of Växjö Diocese, Martin Modéus [the bishop's brother Martin is bishop of Linköping].

In the life-interpreting rites of the church we always call a person by name. In baptism to demonstrate that you are embraced by God's grace, which is all you need. In the burial service to emphasise that you have to let go of everything, so that the Risen One can take hold of you, put arms around your shoulders and help you take the last steps through death's transparent veil. Many of us also pray for others by name as we go through life, perhaps daily. We commit one another into God's hands. Your false trails are known.

Perhaps some of you remember the words from today's Old Testament text [Ezekiel 34: 11-16]: "I will seek the lost and bring home the strays, I will bind up the injured, help the sick, but I will watch over the strong and the flourishing"¹. What a summing up! Here is the experience of how difficult it can be to plot a course, the promise that someone is searching for us, and the experience of how life chafes, and not finding the way properly. It sets out the field hospital's task, to bind up people's wounds, but it also gives the picture of the one who watches over the strong and fit. For in the

¹ Translator's note – the translation from Hebrew of Ezekiel 34:16 relied upon here is from the Swedish 'Bibel 2000', which is consistent with other versions such as Luther's (16th century) German Bible and the New Jerusalem Bible.

presence of God your whole life is encompassed – weakness and strength, going astray and competence, doubt's genuine questions and faith's confident reply.

Sometimes it is especially difficult to interpret your life. Then the Good Shepherd whispers the words of grace into your heart: *In the middle of the forest there is a glade that can only be found by someone who has lost his way.*

Translation: Michael Nunn