

Gospel text

John 10: 1-10

1 Truly, truly, I assure you, he who does not try to enter the sheep fold through the door, but by climbing it from another place, this one is a thief and a robber. 2 But whoever tries to enter through the door, here is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The doorkeeper agrees to open the door, and the sheep obey his voice, and the sheep belonging to him, he calls each one by name and he leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all that belong to him, he walks before them and the sheep follow him, for they recognize his voice. 5 On the other hand, they will not follow a stranger, they will rather flee him, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers. 6 This is what Jesus said to them in figures, but they did not understand what he meant. 7 So Jesus took up again, "Truly, truly, I assure you, I am the door (the shepherd) of the sheep. 8 All those who came [before me] are thieves and robbers. But the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the door: if anyone enters through me, he will be liberated. He will walk and find pasture. 10 The thief only comes to steal, slaughter and destroy, whereas I have come so that they may have life, and that they may have it overflowing.

Gospel commentary - Homily

True and false leaders

We are currently seeing a curious phenomenon called populism. And this phenomenon allows certain leaders to stand out from others. The most remarkable is undoubtedly Donald Trump in the United States who has received the support of many people who feel downgraded and hold it against the elite. But we can add other names. In France, there is Marine Le Pen who is making the voice of France deep baffled by the new face of the country which she no longer recognizes, imputing responsibility to immigration. Recep Erdoğan, in Turkey, was able to channel people's fear after certain terrorist attacks and an attempt to overthrow the regime to assume all political powers. We can add Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines who promised to solve the drug problem drastically by eliminating without trial all those allegedly linked to it. The list of this type of leaders could grow.

What all of these names have in common is that they all claim to speak for the people and express their deep will. They offer simple solutions, which people can understand, to complex problems. For those who want to be a disciple of Jesus, one cannot help asking the question: but is this an example to follow? Is this real leadership? Is this the model proposed by Jesus himself? And if we believe that Jesus represents the authentic man, true humanity, can we not conclude that a leadership radically different from his is destructive of humanity? Today's Gospel gives us an opportunity to reflect on this point.

The Gospel presents two allegories, that of the shepherd and the thief / bandit, and that of the shepherd and the stranger. Let's summarize. Unlike the thief and the bandit who take short cuts, the shepherd joins his flock by the path we expect, the door. Unlike the foreigner, the shepherd knows each of the sheep by name, he takes the initiative to push them out of the enclosure, he walks in front of them to show the way, and the sheep follow, because they recognize his voice.

Then, as in any allegory, you have to interpret the symbols. The door and the shepherd are Jesus. The sheep are obviously the Christian community. Any shepherd, who does not match the model proposed by Jesus (the door), is an impostor. On the other hand, if he matches this model, he will be a source of liberation, and will lead people to find what they really need. Thanks to him, people will become truth seekers and people who love their brother, which comes down to having life and an abundant life.

This is the catechesis of the fourth Gospel. You will never know what Jesus really said and what is left of it in the source that the evangelist uses. But the trace left by all the evangelists and what modern scholarship has been able to extract from the story of Jesus gives us the portrait of a leader who, for two and a half years, went to meet people where they were, listened to them and knew how to understand them, lived compassion in front of their misery, knew them by name, knew how to put them back to work, revived what was dead, inspired hope, and at the same time, he was demanding, inviting to follow him on a path where one cannot rest much, himself taking the lead, and freely accepting to give his life for love. It is the model of the leader that he left us.

The fourth Gospel is a complex composition, probably written in several phases. And as a story is often marked by what the author experiences, we can see in this story sections of the history of this community that is sometimes called: the community of the beloved disciple. Around the year 60 or 65, when the evangelist completed the first iteration of his work, Palestine was in turmoil with the nationalist insurgency movements against the Roman occupier, which would lead to the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70. The members of the Christian community were certainly under pressure from nationalist leaders who cared more for their cause than for the good of the people. On top of that, there is regular pressure from their Jewish colleagues when they go together to the synagogue and who remind them of the authority of Moses and all the great leaders of the Jewish community. For the evangelist, all these leaders are impostors, people who have entered through the back door without really having taken the time to know people, who do not act in broad daylight, but use subversion.

Thirty years have passed when the community has to leave their familiar surroundings of Palestine after they have been expelled from the synagogues, they have to emigrate for security reasons and go to Asia Minor, more precisely to Ephesus, in present-day Turkey. In this context, the evangelist, also traditionally known as John the Presbyter, revises his story, because the context has changed. This is how the mention of the shepherd who pushes the sheep out appears, an allusion to their emigration from Palestine. And the community faces a new type of challenge, the division of leaders within the Church.

Because the Judeo-Christians, this group of Christian Jews which included James, the brother of Jesus, believe that the Jewish laws, in particular circumcision and the rites of purity, always apply for the Christian. And they exert a great influence through the Church of Antioch. In addition, the Church of Antioch is very structured, and misunderstands this somewhat mystical group which speaks of light and love. Thus the enclosure becomes an enclosure with multiple herds, and there the sheep must distinguish their shepherd from foreigners. How is this distinction made? By the recognition of the voice, i.e. what the shepherd is, what he says, what he does, correspond to what moves us internally, to what our deep being is. This is how the shepherd will come to liberate so that we can find life.

Two thousand years later, we must rewrite this story. It must be rewritten not only in the context of the present Church, but also in the context of humanity in general. Because at the end, people must find life, which is defined according to the evangelist by the search for truth and the love of the brother. And it is the role of the leader, both religious and secular, to lead it. Someone who is only driven by an ideology or a cause, and not primarily by the knowledge and deep love of people, is an impostor; its action can only be destructive. The Church, as much as the whole universe, brings together a great diversity of people, and therefore a great diversity of leaders. And it will be normal that some recognize the voice of such and such a leader, but consider foreign such and such other; as the evangelist himself says, "In my Father's house there are many mansions" (Jn 14: 2). But everyone must have the same goal, which was that of Jesus as leader: to give people what they really need, which sometimes involves "pushing people out" of their comfort zone, taking the time to get to know each other by his name and love them, but no need to be authoritarian, because people believe in him, trust him and willingly embarks on the journey to which he invites them.

Where are Donald Trumps, Marine Le Pen, Recep Erdoğan and Rodrigo Duterte fitting in this model? Where are our religious leaders standing? Where do we stand ourselves, as a religious or secular leader, or as a parent? It's up to everyone to answer.

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, April 2017