

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

*As he went ashore,
Jesus saw a great crowd;
and he had compassion for them,
because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*

If I'd been a knackered apostle
looking forward to a quiet retreat,
sailing off into the sunset with the Son of God
for some well earned R&R,
I know I'd have been a little annoyed
to arrive at that exclusive, hard-to-get-to retreat centre,
only to find it overrun by crowds of bleating souls.

And I know I'd have sulked for days
in response to Jesus choosing to prioritize *them*
instead of *us*,
instead of *me*!

And I'd have had to take yet another hard lesson on board.

Our compassionate Christ
is always on the lookout for lost sheep,
even when focused on something else,
like he undoubtedly was
on those poor, hard working, apostles,
giving up so much to be there beside him.

But that's precisely the point.
They had found their shepherd,
or rather their shepherd had found them.
They had found themselves found.

And they were beginning to discover together
a sense of belonging, purpose and peace –
in stark contrast to the isolation and lostness,
the ‘fear and dismay’ as Jeremiah has it,
of the crowds bleating for Jesus’ attention.

Jesus doesn’t abandon his little apostolic flock,
as they step ashore from the boat,
but he does refuse to let them retreat
into holier-than-thou them-and-us-ness.

He helps them all learn
that the only reason they’re special,
is because they’re learning they are.

They still have lessons to learn,
they have good news to share,
they have love to live.

And that’s our religion:
nothing exclusive, escapist about it.

And however we learn to look after ourselves
and one another -
as of course we must learn -
it must never lead us
to closing our heart,
to turning our back,
to another.

For if we do,
we’ll be closing our heart,
turning our back,
to Jesus.

Because that's where Jesus will always be:
there with the lost and the hurting.

Wherever our boat may be moored,
all around us every day,
we are surrounded by crowds of lost souls:
some bleating louder than others;
some tentatively edging towards us;
some running away like the clappers;
some stuck immobile in ruts.

Compassion means noticing,
turning towards them,
being there with them,
open hearted,
sharing the good news we're learning,
living the love we're discovering.

'Chaplaincy''s a label
we stick on people learning compassion,
in all kinds of places,
in all kinds of ways:
full time, half time, part time;
voluntary, paid;
shopping malls, ambulance stations, hospices;
high streets, community centres, schools;
hospitals, hairdressers, prisons;
villages, cities and farms;
to name but a few.

Wherever people are,
chaplains can be.

Wherever lost sheep are bleating,
there chaplains *should* be.

‘Chaplain’'s a label
that means ‘Guardian of the Holy Half-Cloak’.
(Maybe we’d get more volunteers,
if we put that on the label!)

The fourth century woollen cloak in question
belonged to an eighteen year old Eastern European,
serving in an occupying army in France.

Christianity had just been legalized,
and Martin had recently begun learning
about this strange, still new religion.

He was approaching the city gate of Amiens
on horseback one chilly winter’s day,
when he noticed an unclothed man,
bleating by the side of the road,
begging for help.

Moved by compassion,
Martin took his soldier-sword,
sliced his soldier-cloak in two,
and gave half to the stranger.

That night Martin dreamed
of Jesus wearing that half-cloak.

Soon afterwards he was baptized,
and went on to become a famous example
of practical, prayerful, living love.
And after his death,
Martin’s half of the cloak was preserved,
and became a revered symbol of the saint’s renown.

The Latin word for cloak is *cappa*
and those charged with guarding Martin's holy half-cloak
were labelled *cappellanus*
translated from Latin into French *chapelain*,
and on down into our English label *chaplain*.

The mystical religion that we follow
calls us to notice and attend to,
to turn, and open heart to,
Christ present in ourselves and one another.

And the Shepherd's life of love
we are all called to live -
whether labelled chaplain yet or not -
is not to protect a holy relic of the past,
but compassionately to share
whatever cloak we're given,
compassionately to be
whatever cloak we can be,
with the uncloaked and unshepherded,
whose holy shores we land upon,
whose holy paths we cross.

St Martin did it his way.
The apostles did it theirs.
And we must do it ours.