

Shepherds and Sheep

By Jane Via

April 29, 2012, Fourth Sunday of Easter

Today we read passages from the New Testament not read in canonical churches. We included these readings in our lectionary to educate ourselves about the leadership roles that women and married couples played in the early church.

We learn about Priscilla and Aquila from Paul's Letter to the Romans (written c. 58 CE) and from Acts (written c. 90 CE). Together, these two documents reveal a lot about them:

1. They went to Corinth from Italy after Roman Emperor Claudius¹ expelled Judeans and Judean Christians from Rome.
2. Paul met them in Corinth in the early 50s and lived with them.
3. They were tentmakers.
4. Paul ministered side by side with them "in the service of Jesus Christ."
5. They risked their lives for Paul.
6. They travelled from Corinth to Ephesus with Paul.
7. Their leadership was evident in their correction of Apollos' teaching.
8. When Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans, they were again in Rome.
9. All the Gentile churches were grateful to them.
10. They hosted a church in their house in Rome

¹ Claudius was Emperor of Rome from 41 – 54 CE.

This information reveals that Priscilla and Aquila were important leaders, teachers of the faith and organizers of a house church. They exercised their ministry primarily as a couple. If there were shepherds in the early church, they were among them.

We also meet Phoebe in Romans. Phoebe was a deacon in church of Cenchreae who travelled to Rome. Paul recommended her to the Romans as one who looked after “a great many believers” [Ro 16.1], including himself. She, too, was a shepherd in the early church.

We think of priests as shepherds of their parishes, Bishops as shepherds of their dioceses and of the Pope as ultimate shepherd of the church. The canonical church never applies this title to a woman or a couple, despite Biblical evidence.

In Hebrew Bible, God is the shepherd of Israel. Religious leaders of ancient Israel and Judah also claimed the title. Ezekiel excoriated religious leaders of his time as terrible shepherds who cared for themselves rather than their flocks (Ez 34:1-8). In John’s gospel: Jesus is God’s lamb; Jesus is the Good Shepherd, possibly in conscious contrast to the abusive, self-serving shepherds Ezekiel criticized; and Jesus tells Peter, that if Peter loved him, Peter would feed Jesus’ lambs and tend Jesus’ sheep.

Does the title “shepherd” have any contemporary value at all? Shepherds were a basic reality in ancient Israel. Herding was the basis of its economy. People depended on sheep and goats for clothes, oil, meat, milk, cheese and skins for tents. Even in the Judah of Jesus’ time, products from sheep and goats remained a significant part of the economy. For modern, westerners like us, however, shepherds may conjure an idealized, romantic past; but they are distant realities.

There is also the problematic accompanying image of sheep! Sheep and goats are reputedly unintelligent, can’t care for themselves, and must be led to water and food. Their survival depends on the expertise and responsibility of the shepherd.

The contemporary people of God, however, are capable of reflecting on and understanding our faith experience and of informing and forming our consciences. We don't need the magisterium to survive and thrive in our faith lives. The idea that non-ordained believers are sheep in relationship to the ordained is insulting. These are good reasons to abandon the images of the shepherd and sheep in our time.

If we continue to use these images, I suggest that we reverse roles. Like the religious leaders of Ezekiel's time, the magisterium of today is lost. Its members focus on their interests rather than the well-being of those they claim their flock. They put their own needs and rules ahead of those they claim to serve. They feed and clothe themselves from our contributions, often extravagantly. It is *they* whose physical survival depends on *us*. Yet they throw believers to the wolves when believers exercise their consciences, fail to seek out those they believe lost, and shut out those they believe have strayed. Instead, they "lord it over them brutally and harshly", as Ezekiel said in his time. If shepherding is needed, it is the magisterium that needs shepherding. I suggest that the non-ordained adopt the role of shepherd and assume responsibility to lead the magisterial sheep

We could excoriate our leaders who claim to be shepherds and threaten them with divine reprisal as Ezekiel did. Instead, I suggest we simply take seriously our priesthood as believers and undertake to shepherd. By living as faithful believers; by adapting to modern culture and embracing scientific developments; by participating in the development of the church's self-understanding, living the gospel, and serving as Jesus did, we are already caring for the church the magisterium claims to shepherd. By living our faith with integrity, we become their shepherds. We demonstrate that it's our turn to lead and their turn to follow. We feed Jesus' lambs. We tend his sheep.

