

SHEEP AMONG WOLVES

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BEHOLD, I send you as sheep among wolves; be you therefore as cunning as serpents and as simple as doves' (Matt. x, 16).

Our Lord spoke these words to the apostles when he was sending them out for their first piece of apostolic work, and the Dominican order is quite explicitly and openly an apostolic order. It was founded by St Dominic to carry on the work of the apostles, the work of preaching the gospel. All the different branches of the order, the second and third orders as much as the first, are all caught up in this apostolic function, but of course in different ways and degrees. In the fullest way it is the priests and brothers of the first order who are given this apostolic function. Officially and authoritatively it is *our* business, not yours, to preach the gospel by the spoken and written word and by all our priestly activities.

We, the priests and brothers, are the most obvious ones in the Dominican family to be sent by our Lord as sheep among wolves; but if these sheep sent by Christ to the wolves are to do any good, we have to have some sort of contact with the wolves, to communicate with them. But who are the wolves? They are the unbelievers, lapsed Catholics, the lukewarm, the ordinary people of this world to whom the gospel is preached; and our job of course is by preaching it to turn them into sheep.

Now the business of making contact between the sheep sent by Christ and the wolves to whom they are sent is primarily, I suppose, the work of God's secret graces acting in the hearts of those to whom the gospel is preached; but it is also the work of others of God's instruments, and as far as we are concerned, I suggest it is the function of the third order to act as the first order's contact men in the world, among the people to whom we are supposed to preach.

We are sent as sheep among wolves; and what *you* are is sheep there already among the wolves; sheep, if you like, dressed in wolves' clothing. You are not false prophets deceiving our Lord's

flock—at least I hope not; you are true apostles infiltrating into the devil's pack—at least you ought to be.

Now to be a sheep in wolves' clothing clearly calls for infinite resource and sagacity, and so our Lord tells his apostles to be like two other animals—the apostle must look a weird monster, sheep, snake and dove all in one. You have to be as cunning as serpents. The serpent is a complex symbol in the old testament; it stands quite obviously of course for the devil, but then there is also that strange story which our Lord quotes in St John's gospel, of the brazen serpent made by Moses, and the people were healed from the bite of the fiery serpents when they looked on it.

I think that when our Lord tells us to be as cunning, as prudent as snakes, he is suggesting that we must not leave all the cleverness, all the skill, all the intelligence in this world on the devil's side. Perhaps he is also telling us a little more than that, for the serpent in antiquity was a symbol, among other things, of healing. Besides the story I have just mentioned of the brazen serpent which healed the people when they looked on it, there is the pagan cult of Aesculapius, the god of healing, who was worshipped under the guise of a snake. That is why the R.A.M.C. have the serpent on their cap-badge. But if the serpent was a symbol of healing, then being as cunning as serpents surely involves having something of the skill of the doctor; it means devoting all our skill, all our intelligence, all our understanding to the work of the gospel, which is a work of healing.

If the doctor is to do his work properly he must approach his patients and their troubles and diseases with a certain amount of *dispassion*. There is nothing so effective as an over-emotional approach to things at spoiling good work and good intentions. Even if a doctor or a surgeon is operating, say, on his own son, he must regard his son's injuries with a dispassionate eye, otherwise he will miff the operation. I suppose that is why medical men are very reluctant to operate on or to advise their own nearest relatives and friends; because the necessary dispassionate approach, unemotional, objective, rational, cold as a snake if you like, is going to be upset by any emotional quiver.

If we are going to be effective in preaching the gospel, we must have something of that clinical approach to the problems and situations that confront us; we have to avoid letting passion, emotion, feeling, even the noblest sentiments, distort our judgment,

making it shimmery and hazy. So we have to be as cunning and prudent and as coldly calculating as serpents; perhaps I may add as silent as snakes too. So many good and zealous Catholics spoil all their good intentions by making too much noise in the world, protesting too loudly against this, that, and the other. If we work quietly, just by being prudent, devout, intelligent, and understanding Catholics in the world, we will be much more effective as contacts with the wolves.

Finally, we have to combine the cunning of serpents with the simplicity of doves. I do not know why the dove was chosen as the symbol of simplicity; those who try to shoot pigeons will know that their simplicity is not entirely lacking in guile. If you have read that delightful book *King Solomon's Ring*, by the Austrian naturalist Konrad Lorenz, you will know that compared to the highly principled and honourable wolf the dove is a very demon of ruthless ferocity. However, the biblical view is clearly different, and I suppose that in the old testament the dove was the symbol of simplicity partly because of its rather dull colouring—it is not a flashy bird like the peacock; but principally because the dove is traditionally an amorous bird, always billing and cooing. I suggest that Dominican tertiaries ought to be amorous birds. You cannot make good contact men in the world unless you win people's friendship and sympathy—in other words, unless you love them. You must be prepared to meet them on their own ground, in a friendly, warmhearted, human way, and to be interested in them as people.

So then I think we might say that the simplicity God demands of us, the simplicity of the dove, is the simplicity of charity. It is approaching our apostolic duties with a pure, unmixed motive and intention, the love of God and of our neighbour, unmixed with any ambition, self-seeking or vainglory, or sensitiveness about our own dignity, our own position, our own self-esteem. It is simplicity of will and heart. We need to combine simplicity of heart and purpose with a considerable shrewdness, a dispassionate, clinical quality of mind.

To return to the beginning, these are the qualities that have to be found in sheep, in our Lord's sheep. We are called sheep in the gospel because the sheep is such a silly animal, really. It cannot look after itself, it has to have a shepherd looking after it. We cannot look after ourselves either, we are no use cut off from our

shepherd, no good when we forget that we have been sent by the shepherd. We think we are our own, we try to do our work independently, and the result is nothingness, a mess. As our Lord said to his apostles just before his crucifixion, 'Without me you can do nothing'.



ST BENEDICT JOSEPH LABRE

P.C.C.

ON Wednesday in Holy Week 1783, an emaciated, tattered ragbag of a young beggar-man collapsed on the steps of Sta Maria dei Monti where he had attended mass. At eight o'clock that night he was dead and with the morning light a scrabble of urchins went shouting in the gutters of Rome, '*E morte il santo!*'. The fiercely enthusiastic scenes and circumstances surrounding his death seemed prescient of an early official recognition of his sanctity. No doubt the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars delayed this and he was beatified in May 1860 and canonized in December 1883.

It is more than unfortunate that his name has become synonymous with eccentricity, exaggeration and squalor. Perhaps this most humble of men, for whom none had greater contempt than he had for himself, would prefer it that way. He is in the splendour of the saints. His name is inscribed on the heavens in letters of golden fire, yet it still, alas for our unenlightened souls, so often brings a smirk to our lips. Benedict Joseph Labre: a saint, undoubtedly, but does one need to go to such lengths or to descend to such depths?

We have to admit that the lice, the rags and the general absence of hygiene do not coincide with our ideas of holiness. And there we stick, with perhaps a puzzled shrug or devout thanks that God has not decreed that the strait and narrow way should be louse-ridden for all of us. Benedict Joseph would be the first to agree. He never sought disciples or strove to impress anyone with a message or a way of life. He had no theories about life: