

Christ the King A: Matthew 25:31-46
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Church of the Good Shepherd
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Learning Politics from a Shepherd

This past week, I heard on two different radio shows a segment on the same topic: “What not to talk about at Thanksgiving dinner.” The topics the audience was advised to steer clear of were hardly novel—family scandals, other guest’s lifestyles, how much someone else was eating, and of course politics—the Trump lawsuits, Biden’s decline, the collapsed border, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, inflation and rise in crime. There’s a lot to *not* talk about, especially if you keep up with the news. All that is left, it seems, are sports and television shows!

And yet, now that the turkey has been picked over and the pie polished off, and waistlines let out, we find ourselves in church, talking about one of those forbidden topics—politics. For today is Christ the King Sunday, when we celebrate Jesus’ rule over all. Politics may not be a safe topic for dinner with extended family, but we can talk about it and indeed *should* talk about it, because our faith has a lot to say about politics—not simply about which candidate or cause to support, but the whole matter of power and its use.

On this, I have in mind the observations of the 20th century French philosopher, Michel Foucault. Now, I imagine you’re thinking—What does some radical, turtleneck-wearing, French philosophe from the 60s have to teach *us*? Such skepticism is not unwarranted. Foucault was hardly an apologist for Christianity; he was in fact a staunch atheist. And the project that Foucault and his friends set themselves to was nothing less than the breaking down of the social order and institutions of the West. Yet, in seeking to undermine the foundations of our society, he acquired deep insight into the nature of those foundations, insight largely hidden from those who take those foundations for granted.

Foucault shared his insights in a series of lectures given in 1978. When we think of our beliefs about politics and government, Foucault began, most often we assume we got those ideas from the Greco-Roman world. Athens and Rome gave us democracy, senates, and public debates, after all. This assumption is, however, a mistake, Foucault declared. The genealogy of modern government goes back not to Greece or Italy but to the deserts of the eastern Mediterranean, to ancient Israel. The ancestry of our beliefs about power and government lies not in the robed philosopher with his skilled rhetoric, but in a dusty shepherd attentively tending his flock. For, the kind of power that we expect, that we are wired to follow, Foucault argued, is not purely rational or logical, but pastoral.

To see what he was getting at, consider the hit HBO comedy *Veep*. *Veep* is about the ambitious Vice President Selena Meyer and her attempts to climb the slippery pole of politics, while thinking of only herself and the power she could wield from the Oval Office. The humor comes when Selena is forced to interact with her constituents, shaking hands with or hearing stories from normal people. We know that she cares little for such people, but to gain power, she must assume a caring guise, faking concern for every boring Ohio factory worker she meets. What

makes the show so funny is the juxtaposition of the politician's self-centeredness and the need to be perceived as pastoral, as caring about her constituents. The humor is in the hypocrisy.

But why, Foucault asks us, do we find such behavior hypocritical? Why do we assume a politician should care anything for those she aims to govern? The answer, Foucault asserted, is found in the desert of the Middle East, in the pastoral societies built on managing herds of sheep and cattle.

Israel, he explained, took its political cues from its experience of God, of God as *shepherd*. God came to the world not as a raiding king or ruler, but as a shepherd who acted pastorally, caring for and overseeing his people, his flock. God's pastoral rule then became Israel's model for its own rulers. You see this in 1 Samuel, when Israel wanted a king "like the other nations," and God refused. God reminded them that kings in other nations "lord their power over" their people. But they, *they* are a people who belong to a shepherd. An earthly king would disrupt and corrupt that pastoral relationship. It is little surprise that when God relented and allowed them a king, the king after God's own heart was a shepherd boy, David, David who was so schooled in the pastoral that he was not even available—he was tending his flocks—when the prophet Samuel comes to town like an ancient scout for *America's Got Talent*. Those of us who know Israel's history may take it for granted, but the view that the king should rule his people as a shepherd tends to his flock, is shockingly unique to the ancient world. You don't see that anywhere else.

And it stood in sharp contrast to the nations around them. According to Foucault, the shepherd's power is exercised not over a territory but over a flock, and more exactly, over the flock in its movement from one place to another. The shepherd's rule is essentially exercised over a 'multiplicity in movement.' Greek rulers, by contrast, mirrored their deities, who were territorial gods, who each had their privileged place, their own town or temple, which they protected jealously. The Hebrew God, however, is never more present and visible than when his people are on the move—for in their wanderings, Israel's God goes ahead of them, leading them, showing them where to find green pastures and still waters.

Another way this shepherd ideal is unique, Foucault observed, is in the fact that the authority it exercises is defined by generosity, by charity, by giving. Pastoral power is at heart a *beneficent* power, benefitting those it seeks to rule. Sure, other forms of governance claim to serve the good, but the exercise of power in other nations, in the Greco-Roman city-state, say, was beneficent only *in part*. To the Greco-Roman mind, Foucault explained, power is demonstrated as much by its omnipotence, and by its wealth and splendor, as it is by its beneficence. Indeed, power to them is demonstrated supremely by domination over others, by the ability to triumph over enemies, to defeat them, and reduce them to slavery. It is in conquering others, and accumulating their wealth and territory that beneficence, that is, benefit to citizens, enters the conversation.

This is not so with the shepherd God of Israel. Israel's God is generous and good by nature. Beneficence—generosity and goodness—makes up every molecule of God's being. This God is mighty because He is good. And this God is good because He is a pastor, a shepherd, who makes himself known chiefly in caring for his people.

We see this explicitly in our first lesson, from the prophet Ezekiel: God says “I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. And I will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak. But the fat and the strong I will destroy.”

That last line is important. For, care for the people, especially the poor and weak, is the continual refrain of prophets like Ezekiel. The prophet’s job, you see, is to call out the leaders of Israel when they departed from their pastoral duties, as they evidently had here. They were no longer ruling as shepherd-kings, but rather grew “fat and strong” at the expense of the weak.

A comparable complaint today would be the phrase “drain the swamp.” It suggests that the powerful of Washington care more about maintaining their power, wealth, and territory, their own bureaucratic fiefdoms, than they do serving the good of the people. We may not think it explicitly, but we expect our politicians to use their power to protect and provide resources necessary for the people to thrive. So, if we’re going to spend billions on defense, it must be justified as being used not for the sake of wealth and territory but for peace and stability. If we are going to subsidize certain industries, it can’t be to enrich donors but for the benefit of everyone.

Of course, we may differ on what “pastoral leadership” looks like in this moment—whether shepherding the people means protecting them from hardcore terrorists or from hunger, whether caring for the people means slaying the lion that would gobble up the sheep or leading them to green pastures to receive full stomachs. This is why we argue about politics. But, to Foucault’s point, regardless of what politicians believe, they all have to feign beneficence, to speak in terms of providing for the people, if they want our support.

A third way that Foucault says the shepherd-God is unique is in the way the God of Israel cares not just for the flock, his people, as a whole, but individually as well. While the shepherd oversees the whole flock, and leads the flock as a group, he cares for each one. When a sheep strays, he doesn’t just write it off. He doesn’t do a cost-benefit analysis and decide that it is not worth losing the entire flock for one lost sheep. He makes sure the rest of the flock is safe and then he goes after the one who wandered off. “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed,” God promises in our first lesson. Because each sheep is under his care and deserving of his attention. Only from the practice of shepherding would we assume that it is the politician’s responsibility to care for all people, seeing each person as worth attention and not just as a cog in the machine of territorial possession and expansion.

The uniqueness of this approach is lost on us today, as we can’t imagine it being otherwise. Respect for individuality is what we are used to. How could a society be any other way? We’ve heard rumors of what it’s like to live in places like North Korea or USSR before its collapse, but really the only places where we might come in contact with a society that denies the dignity of the individual in fiction, in dystopias like *The Handmaid’s Tale* or *The Walking Dead*. Season 7 of *The Walking Dead*, in fact, can be interpreted as a fight between pastoral and Greco-Roman views of power. On one side, you have Rick Grimes and his friends, who are building a community and sacrificing for the care of others. On the other is a gang led by a guy named

Negan, who demands total allegiance from his followers. Negan's people even lose their names as part of his gang. When asked who they are, they say "I'm Negan." This is Greco-Roman power, where the people owe everything to the ruler, complete and unquestioned devotion. Not so for the shepherd. Instead of the people owing the leader everything, Rick as the shepherd-king gives himself, risks himself for the sake of those in his care.

Even though Foucault is not a believer, he acknowledged that the idea of the shepherd-king is realized finally in Jesus. Jesus is the fullness of the shepherding God - the true "good shepherd," who is on the move, bound by no territory (not even death). He tends to his flock throughout the whole world, as he goes before them, leading them, providing for their needs out of his goodness, out of his very being, as he sacrifices himself, lays down his life for the sheep, his friends.

Even as judge, Jesus remains a shepherd. As we see in our Gospel lesson, Jesus is king, sitting on the throne, but the power he exercises is a pastoral power, separating sheep from goats as a Middle Eastern shepherd would. This is not the exercise of arbitrary, bureaucratic, or legal power, but rather personal power, the power of one who knows each sheep and each goat, even if they do not know him.

Foucault may not a Christian, but he serves us by identifying how much our expectation of politics and government are surprisingly shaped by the God of the Bible, the God who shepherds his people, who provides for their wellbeing out of his goodness, who knows and cares for each of us, who is willing to sacrifice himself for the wellbeing of his people.

That is something to remember as we gird ourselves for what will surely be a contentious election year. Not that any candidate will live up to the ideal of the shepherding God. But rather to encourage us to continue longing for such a leader, to not allow ourselves to grow cynical, but to keep alive an expectation, a hope, for someone who at least *aims* at this ideal, even while we know that that longing will never be satisfied, not until Jesus returns and establishes his throne on earth. And so we pray, come Lord Jesus. Thanks be to God!