**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

I was talking earlier this week to a young man from outside this parish who has suffered over the past several months with depression. Naturally I won’t identify him, and in fact I can be fairly sure that none of you here this morning knows him anyway, but it is a fact in today’s society that depression is more widespread than we think it is and yet is still rarely spoken about. It is one of life’s great taboos to admit to what is still – and wrongly – seen as weakness.

Anyway, that young man was telling me that, having finally admitted to himself that what he had was not something that would go away by itself, he went to his company’s doctor, who did three things – all of which impressed me. First the doctor gave him some medication – for the short term; to set him back on his feet again. Second, the doctor arranged some talking therapy, to give him a safe outlet for his feelings and to help him come to terms with the fact of depressive illness. And finally – and for me most hopefully – instructed this young man to read a book entitled Depressive Illness – the curse of the strong.

The Curse of the Strong. Having been there myself a good few years ago, I found that phrase such an immensely powerful one. And having benefitted from both the chemical and the talking therapies, I still wish someone back then had offered me that book to read. Because depression is so often the curse of strong people. And that means people who try to fight their way out of this condition, because to admit to having depression would itself feel like an admission of weakness. And we think we ought to be able to manage. But it absolutely isn’t. And we often can’t.

And that is quite a long and convoluted way of getting to the point of today’s gospel. The very earliest pictures of Christ were found in the catacombs. From the early and middle years of the third century up until somewhere in the sixth or seventh century, the Romans were burying people in catacombs, deep underground, outside the city of Rome. They are built into a layer of quite soft volcanic rock, and while it is covered in earth, it stays quite soft, but once it has contact with air, it hardens, so it was very stable as a burial place. And there were pagan, Jewish and Christian burial areas in the catacombs.

There developed in the Christian burial areas a tradition of funeral art and iconography, from which historians could surmise that Christianity was making its way into all strata of society; and some of the earliest depictions of Jesus were as the Good Shepherd: Christ carrying a lamb on his shoulders – rescuing the lost, and shepherding men and women to new resurrection life. In fact, the term caemeterium derived from the Greek word for dormitory, so sleeping area, stressing the fact that for Christians, burial is just a temporary moment while they wait for the final resurrection.

And while I am on about translations and origins of words: the term ‘good’ as in Good Shepherd isn’t translated as kind or any of those things; it is a value judgement – so, great shepherd, or fabulous or amazing or wonderful shepherd might be a truer translation.

In our culture, we often deny the need for help; we don’t think we need help. Or we see that other people don’t seem to need help and therefore we don’t feel able to ask for it either.

But John makes a distinction between those who are Jesus’ sheep and those who aren’t. And it is a self-definition. ***But you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.***

So how do we recognise ourselves as sheep? Deep down, we all know our weakness and our need. But it takes more than that – we have not only to be honest, but also to share that honesty with others. Only in that do we acknowledge our reality: which is that we all need help. Admitting to weakness and need of help is not an expression of pitifulness; it is an expression of reality. And by that, we receive God’s gifts of grace.

I was talking to the children at St Peter’s School earlier this week about a man called Jean Vanier, a French Canadian, who died, aged 90, at the beginning of the week. He founded the L’Arche movement, which holds to the principle that all people can become adults with responsibility and all people have the right to a loving home-environment in which to flourish. When he was a young man, people with learning disabilities were shut away in institutions, but he proved the institutions wrong and set about building home-sized communities of able and less-able men and women, in which each person learned from all the others what it meant to grow and mature and flourish.

And one of the things Vanier said was that people, when they share their weakness and difficulty, nourish others so much more than when they share only their successes. I know from personal experience that sharing that weakness leads to conversation at a far deeper level than protecting ourselves with half-truths ever did.

So we need to admit that we are sheep. Sheep who need the Good Shepherd. Sheep who need Christ’s help to live our lives in the most fruitful way possible. As human beings, we are autonomous and independent only so far. And the net result of trying to be more than human is precisely things like depressive illness – about which we don’t speak because it admits to weakness. Except that it doesn’t: it speaks of having tried to be strong for too long… it is the curse of the strong.

My sheep hear my voice. Not the bishop. OR some high-up spiritual guru. My sheep – all of us ordinary followers of Jesus - can hear that voice. We may have difficulty believing and acting on it though. So we need to cultivate an awareness of the tone and quality and nature of Jesus’ voice in our lives. We can hear Jesus’ voice in things we read; in other people; in prayer and meditation. But in order to hear it, we first need to take the decision that we are a sheep.

So I am telling you today in case there is any doubt. I am a sheep. In my weakness, I need Jesus Christ to pick me up and carry me. I knew that before I had depression and I know it better now. Let us not pretend to be stronger than we are.

If you are of a praying turn of mind, pray for that young man this week – and for anyone else who suffers from trying to be stronger than they need to be.

I have quoted Thomas More before and this seems as good a time as any to do it again: Pray for me – as I will for thee. That we may merrily meet in heaven.

**Amen**