

There is a new 'dog training' programme on the ABC at 6.30 on weeknights. The pattern of the programme is the same each night. A person or a couple have a 'problem' dog. In desperation they call in the 'Dog Whisperer' (Caeser someone) and he diagnoses the problem. Then he goes about retraining or really re-parenting the dog so that it can relax as a 'dog'.

The show is full of wonderful pieces of information about animal behaviour which I find intriguing.

Take, for example, last night's 'bon mot'. "The pack leader does not go to the members of the pack, but the members of the pack come to the pack leader." How about that. I remembered straight away about how I, as a young curate, was 'summoned' to the home of a gracious lady in Geelong to be informed how 'disappointed' she was in me for not praying for the queen. Clearly she knew who was the subordinate in that relationship.

Then there is the matter of pastoral care work in the parish. For some people, coming to the rectory is the proper thing to do. But for other purposes it is important for the priest to visit the members of the congregation. Does that establish a relationship of subordination between the priest as visitor and the member of the congregation as the one who has been visited?

I also remember when I was a chaplain at the Boys Jail there was an hierarchy based around who 'went to see' people and who 'called boys to be seen'. The psychiatrists who were doing court reports for the Children's court were 'allowed' to tie up

the time of a youth officer for more than an hour while they 'called a boy' to speak with them. The chaplains were never allowed to do this, and it was never part of our practice. We 'knew our place'.

But there is theology in here as well. The picture of the incarnation is one that conveys God's love of us in that God, who is in fact the 'pack leader' or 'determiner of the reality of all that is', does not 'summon us to his presence' but in fact 'empties himself of all but love', or as St. Paul puts it 'While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.' It is this self emptying in love that characterizes God as 'pack leader'. Given our 'animal nature' it is not surprising that this love is often seen as weakness. The hymn gets it right when it says

'Though the lowliest form doth veil
thee
as of old at Bethlehem
Here as there thine angels praise
thee
branch and flower of Jesse's stem
Alleluia Alleluia
We in worship join with them.

The thing that Christians can see that other's who are in one sense determined by their 'power nature' and not their 'Christ' nature is that it is in our response to the lowly and of no account that God chooses to reveal to us the depth of love, and to give us the opportunity to show that love. That is why Christianity is never about 'like minded folk' except in the sense that our minds are 'like' that of Christ who always dealt with difference and 'sinners' through love. Another way of putting this is to say 'Christ is more concerned with the ungodly (and ourselves as ungodly) than he is with our righteousness. Or as Archbishop Temple said 'The Church is the only institution which is dedicated to the service of

non-members.'

One of the costs of being a Christian is to accept that sometimes the love of the lowly and the outsider may be seen as weakness. So be it.

Often, I find myself in tears watching the 'Dog Whisperer' show. I see the angry aggressive dogs and sometimes identify with them. The 'Dog Whisperer' says 'They are insecure. They have been attacked by other dogs, or expected to bear the burden of being 'human' instead of being like a dog, and so they get insecure. That is why they are like that.'

So he goes calmly up to the dogs and 'blocks' them. This is not a counter attack, but just something that allows him to be in the 'presence' of the aggressive dog, but not to be intimidated by it. He does not 'back off' but he does not 'advance' either. He is 'just there'. For a while the aggressive dog keeps barking, but after just a few minutes, you can see the 'pressure' of keeping this up gets to the dog. He stops, and starts, and stops, and then stops. He comes up to have a sniff of this new stranger. He gives up on the aggression. Then the 'Dog Whisperer' goes to work. Walking, walking. Dogs behind, people in front. Keep the dog's attention. 'Scruff it', lay it on the ground, You are the 'pack leader.' Your calm leadership and assurance is then conveyed to the dog, who is then more than happy, relieved in fact, to be part of your 'pack' and to not have to be so aggressive.

Some of me identifies with these dogs. I think the parts of me that are insecure generate the aggressive parts of me too. So there's a 'gap' in my upbringing. (Do we not all have them?). But being parish priest is in

some ways like being asked to be the 'dog whisperer'. Maybe God's educative purpose for me as I have been parish priest is to learn to see myself more in my 'dog whisperer' (Good Shepherd?) self, and less in my 'anxious dog' self. I think that if there have been mistakes that I have made in leadership, it has been because I have believed the label of 'problem child' rather than believed the label of 'creative, sensitive and loving.' To believe the 'problem' label is then to act more like the frightened dog in the presence of other people. I hope to learn a lot from the love of this 'dog whisperer'.

Today's Gospel reading of the woman at the well shows us Jesus as the 'Dog (or aggressive lonely woman) whisperer' He knows everything she has ever done. He sees her defensiveness when he asks her about her husbands. But like the 'good shepherd' or the 'dog whisperer' Jesus does not wind up the encounter with more energy, but instead directs her to the source of her need. He is not interested in doctrinal disputes about where the best place to worship God is. He is more concerned that this woman worship in 'Spirit and Truth'. She comes to see Jesus as her 'dog whisperer' because he knew everything about her' yet was not repulsed. He stood there, and instead offered her the opportunity of something that would come from within which would renew her life. What a wonderful Christ he is!
Your 'Companion on The Way' and Priest

Paul Dalzell

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