

Linda Sharpin

Today, my question for you is, what sort of Christian are you?

I don't mean are you 'high church' or 'low church', how do you pray or what sort of hymns you like, but rather how do you see your relationship with God. So I ask, are you a servant, a shepherd, a messenger, a sentinel or a steward – perhaps you are all of these at different times of your life or you may change your persona according to the circumstances or need.

Today's gospel reading is one that is read at the service of ordination of deacons each Pentecost, and the question I ask you this morning is one that all who offer themselves for ordination are asked at their interviews. I ask because it is a question applicable to us all. All of us here are called to follow Christ. Together, as Peter describes it, we form a royal priesthood and a holy nation: and we are all the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

Let me describe what is meant by each of these characteristics: servant; shepherd; messenger; sentinel; and steward and, as I do so, you might like to play a mind game with yourself to choose the one that suits you the best today.

When I have done this, I will let you into the secret of what I am, what I told my selection panel and what probably sits at the root of why I am here today.

Let's start with SERVANT. When we commit ourselves to Christ we give our whole being over to him. As Paul says in Galatians, I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. There is an emptying of self and an inhabiting by God, such that our desire is to do God's will. By being attune to God's will through prayer, we are guided by his Spirit and, as a servant, do his will – or at least as best we can.

Next there comes SHEPHERD. With this description many beautiful images come to mind. There is the shepherd's crook carried by the one who shepherds the sheep, the shepherd takes care of the flock, he cares and protects. Many of us will readily recall 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want' from psalm 23. The Lord looks over us and guides us, and some of us are natural carers, protectors and guiders in daily life.

The title of MESSENGER on the other hand might be given to a teacher, a proclaimer of our Christian faith. They are the evangelist. They receive and bear the message of Christ, and are in possession of sound doctrine. A messenger is persistent in the face of objection and challenge, they will have the strength to rebuke as well as able to encourage and to have the gift of great patience.

A SENTINEL, the description perhaps least familiar to us all, is one who watches, announces and interprets. They scan the horizon. The first horizon is God's, the second is that of his world. The sentinel sees what is coming, interprets it and warns. For this, constant vigilance is required, there is no sleeping on the job. You also need to be dressed for action with your lamps charged, as we heard in today's Gospel reading. The sentinel is humble and obedient to both God and their master. Their vocation is to watch and to be watched over. They are not so much the living water but the pipe through which it flows.

The fifth and final quality is that of a STEWARD. This isn't about being a steward of the earth in the sense of engagement with environmental issues that abound today. It is in the context of keeping Christ's word alive on earth, it is about maintaining the mystery of Christ and sharing in his feast. About identifying, releasing and directing the gifts that you can see in others. A good analogy might be that it is not about being able to play all in the instruments in the orchestra, but rather to be able to conduct them so that they can make the best sound altogether.

Now you have all the descriptions, whilst you ponder on which one resonates most with you, I wonder if you have already guessed which one I might be?

Certainly up to this point in my journey, I am the SENTINEL. As someone who will be ordained to a particular parish, I will not become an incumbent. I will never be 'in charge'. My days of being 'the boss' are thankfully over. With my eyes fixed on Christ, my role is to support Sandy, to do her bidding, and that of the PCC, to support what the parish needs. I will watch, discern, advise and then support.

Christ asks us to inhabit all of these qualities as we represent God here on earth. But I wonder which of these dispositions fits with you best. This week I have brought you lemon cake so, whilst you tuck in, perhaps you might like to let me know your thoughts, or to ask me any questions about my path or, indeed, my time in Loyola.