
FAKE IT—OR FOLLOW?

Marie Antoinette wasn't exactly known for having the common touch. We think of her as the quintessential embodiment of the imperious and entitled elites of the ancien régime, yet she also longed to escape the oppressive routines of court life and live more modestly—something she attempted to do at a fairy tale hamlet she built deep in the woods of Versailles. The place is a fantastic and completely idealized country village, a picturesque mise-en-scene more in keeping with an operetta stage than a royal residence, conceived to be a place where the queen and her ladies-in-waiting, all dressed like shepherdess, could rusticate in a contrived atmosphere of bucolic serenity.

A nineteenth century diarist wrote of visiting the place and what it was like before the revolution when the whole court would escape to the hamlet and play act. "The queen," he said, "Was the farmer's wife and held forth in the dairy, whose interior was dressed entirely in marble. Everyone wore the appropriate costume ... All the thatched cottages had a rustic air, but their interiors were models of luxury and elegance."

When you think about it, there are similarly jarring juxtapositions in our lives of faith, and how what we say and do is so often at odds with how we really feel, which brings me to the day at hand: the Fourth Sunday of Easter. It's nicknamed "Good Shepherd Sunday" and it's tempting for me to speak on some aspect of the comfortable and comforting images of Jesus the Good Shepherd, especially since I worshipped for three years in the Chapel of the Good Shepherd at General Seminary, a beautiful sacred space dominated by a marble statue of Jesus lovingly looking down at a lamb cradled in his arms.

In his memoirs Paul Moore, Jr., a former Episcopal bishop of New York, and like me an alumnus of General, wrote of an eminent member of the seminary's faculty who detested that statue. "He could not stand the sweet, blond Jesus with a fleecy lamb under his arm as an image of God. 'Lambs are not clean,' he snorted." That may be so, yet most of us still yearn for the bucolic geography of an idealized religion and the spirituality of the ubiquitous feel-good spiritual gurus of our time. The trouble is, such geographies and messages are as deceptive and hollow as the idealized hamlet at Versailles.

Of course, it's not at all surprising that the purveyors of facile spiritual tropes should be as wildly popular as they are since we live in a shallow age where practically every photograph on Instagram gets filtered. Who can say anymore what's real—and who

cares? Image is everything. And of course, anything that enables us to keep the pain of authentic living at bay is irresistible. It might be drink or sex or the internet or even—and maybe especially—God. Which is why I think the sentimentalized image of Jesus the Good Shepherd is so appealing to us.

Whatever theological connections Christians of an earlier age may have drawn about Christ the Good Shepherd, our contemporary conception tends to be that of some sort of divine bodyguard who is all softness and forbearance. It's an image at once both sanitized and saccharine. And it's dangerously deceptive, for it hides the stark truth that an authentic spiritual life is difficult and requires sacrifice. Just as Marie Antoinette clothed herself in the shepherdess's costume without any concern for the true meaning of the role, it's easy to make God—make Christ—a player in our religious shams and charades without coming to grips with the fact that we're not called to play acting and frivolity. It's easy to try to run away from God and hide behind the façade of cheery and flimsy piety. It's easy, in short, for us to be escape artists.

Dare I say that religion—Christianity—has become the ultimate escape—or is it sham? Most of us tend to think that a Christian is a certain kind of person with unassailable spiritual credentials and unshakeable faith. Even though we know that we're not that kind of person, we still strive to present that image to the world. *We* know, of course, the real us bears little resemblance to it. And I guess living behind a perpetual facade—or is it living a perpetual lie?—wouldn't be so bad if it didn't lead to having our true identity stolen from us, and to letting the best part of us begin to die—and ultimately be destroyed. Not for nothing did Jesus say, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Funnily enough, though, it's *that* abundant life which we're afraid of. For to be found by Christ, to be lifted up onto his shoulders and borne away into some unknown future, means that much of what we cherish in this life of artifice and avoidance must be—will be—destroyed.

Of course, it's an act of great faith to let Christ take hold of us and to surrender to his re-creative power. That sounds like yet another of the preacher's abstractions. But it isn't. The plain truth is that surrendering to Christ *can* be a source of real pain. The pain of allowing ourselves to be seen for who we are not who we pretend to be. The pain of knowing the beautifully tailored costume of our vain and false selves must be cast aside. The pain of finding out that his voice calls us out of comfortable and bucolic glades of escapism into the real world of affliction and want.

And then there's the pain of realizing that holding on to what we wanted to be is greater than the pain of letting go and letting God make us into who *he* wants us to be. Though we follow the Shepherd's voice into that real world of affliction and want—which certainly isn't as glorious and perfect as that of our fantasies—we must do so without having all the facts spelled out. But how else can it be for those who dare to trust the voice calling them into authentic living?

All of which is to say, the authentic image of the Good Shepherd shows what true liberty, serenity, and Godliness look like. Even more than that, it's to say that to follow the Good Shepherd is to understand that we no longer need to effect the guise of someone we're not, that we can let go of those pretences and open our hands to receive the love that bids us to follow him into the valley of the shadow of death—and beyond to the real and true life found in God's indescribable and liberating kingdom.