

A Poor Parson of a Town

A good man was there of religion too,
A country parson, poor, I assure you,
But he was rich in holy thought and work.
He was also a learned man, a clerk [scholar],
Who Christ's gospel he sought to truly preach;
And devoutly, his parishioners he would teach.

He was gracious, and wonderfully diligent,
Patient in adversity and wondrously content.
He was proven many times, always blithe [happy].
He was loath to curse to obtain a tithe [contribution],
But rather would he give, there is no doubt,
Unto his poor parishioners about,
Part of his income, even of his goods.
Satisfied with little, he had contented moods.

Wide was his parish, with houses far asunder,
But he did not omit, for rain nor thunder,
In sickness or in sin, or any state,
To visit the farthest [parishioner], small and great,
Going by foot, and in his hand a stave [staff].
This noble example to his flock he gave:
First he wrought, and afterwards he taught.
Out of the Gospel that text he caught [took],
And this metaphor he added thereunto:
That if gold rust, what must iron do?

For if a priest be foul, whom we trust,
It is no wonder that a layman yield to lust,
And it is a shame, if he aims to be,
A muck-stained shepherd shepherding clean sheep.
Well ought a priest an example to give,
By his purity, how his sheep should live.

He never put up his benefice [parish] for hire,
Leaving his sheep floundering in the mire,
And run to London, up to old St. Paul's
To get a chantry [paid job, praying] there for souls,
Nor a brotherhood position [guild chaplain] hold;
But dwelt at home, and kept well his fold [parish],
So that a wolf could not make his plans miscarry;
He was a shepherd and not a mercenary.

And holy though he was, and virtuous,
To sinners he was not impious
[disrespectful],
Nor haughty in his speech, nor too divine
[other-worldly],
But in all his teaching, courteous and benign.
To draw folk to heaven by gentleness,
By good example, this was his business.
But if some sinful one proved obstinate,
Be he of high or low estate [rank],
Him, he rebuked, and sharply, at that time.

Nowhere is there known to me one so fine.
He had no thirst for pomp or [showy]
reverence,
Nor had he an overly fussy conscience.
But Christ's own story, and his apostles' twelve,
He taught, but first he followed it himself.

Tend the flock of God in your midst,
overseeing, not by constraint,
but willingly, as God would have it,
not for shameful profit, but eagerly.
Do not lord it over those assigned to
you, but be examples to the flock. †
Peter 5: 2-3