

The Good Shepherd

A sermon preached by Revd Joanna Coney at St Peter's Wolvercote on Sunday 3rd May 2009

John 10.11-18

Jesus said to the Pharisees: ¹¹I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

I was walking through some fields in Cumbria a couple of weeks ago and found myself watching some sheep grazing contentedly surrounded by their lambs. It was an idyllic scene, but slightly marred for me by the memory of something one of my sons said to me when he was working on a farm. "Mum, I hate looking after the sheep because they are quite the silliest animals ever invented (his words). They charge about following each other; they are totally brainless; they never learn how to get themselves through a gate and they constantly get themselves caught on barbed wire or in ditches. Bringing them in in the evening is harder than herding cats!"

And indeed, if you have ever watched sheep closely you will know what exceedingly silly creatures they are, and how useless they are at looking out for themselves – and therefore how utterly dependent they are on the farmer or their shepherd for everything: for food, protection and for health and well being

In our Gospel reading we hear Jesus say to his disciples 'I am the Good shepherd' - I know my sheep; they know me; and I love and care for them. But In Biblical times shepherds were rather different in many ways from shepherds nowadays. To start with, first century oriental shepherds lived permanently and continuously with their sheep day and night, sleeping in the fields with them. They constantly moved their sheep to better pasture; they didn't enclose them in a field and leave them there.

And when moving them they led their flocks from the front, walking slowly with the sheep following willingly and quietly behind them. They never drove them from behind using dogs or motorised quad bikes as we do now so that the sheep are hustled and confused and constantly rushing off in many directions only to be collected and brought back by noisy machines or nipping dogs. No, an oriental shepherd loved his sheep, knew them individually and was always gentle with them. His responsibility was:

- to see that the sheep were well fed and watered by leading them to good pasture
- to gather the flock together and ensure they did not stray off alone
- to know each sheep individually
- to search for any who were lost
- to tend the sick ones
- and to guard them from attack

What a lovely – and apt - picture of God's care for us, his people – his flock. No wonder Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd.

The biblical shepherd lived permanently with his flock. Jesus is always accessible to us, always there whatever we are doing, wherever we are – whether we are aware of it or not. As Teresa of Avila put it: God is nearer to us than breathing, closer than hands and feet.

And then God, like the shepherd, always leads us gently from the front, never forcing us or driving us into anything we are unwilling to do, or into places we are unwilling or unable to go. He takes us at our own slow pace, not hustling us. He gave us free will; he leaves us free to exercise our own choices, our own judgement.

Like a good shepherd God cares for us, making sure we are fed, and cared for when we are sick and giving us protection from evil. And he gathers us together, making sure we are not alone but have one another for support, love and care. He helps us create loving Christian community; and he encourages us to worship him as a community (as we are this morning), and not just alone.

And ultimately and amazingly, in the end he even lays down his life for us, in his unconditional love for us and his longing for our love for him. He died for us, but he also lived – and lives - for us. As God Incarnate Jesus lived for us; he quite literally 'spent' his life for us. He used his time on earth entirely for his people; he quite literally 'lived' for them. In all he was, all he did and all he said, he did it for 'his sheep'. And He died for us. And after his physical death and his resurrection he lives for us again. He lives here and now – for all time – for us.

The 'Good Shepherd' imagery is also, of course, a powerful blueprint for all Christian ministry. As Christ cares for us, so we are to care for each other. When bishops are consecrated they are likened to a Shepherd. They are presented with a shepherd's crook. They are charged to feed and tend their flock, and they are charged with 'oversight' of all their people.

But this is not just a task for Bishops, nor indeed for clergy. It is for each and every one of us. We are all charged with the care of one another. We are silly sheep - yes –and in great need of constant care and guidance. But we are also always to be shepherds to one another. Our reading from the letter of John (1 John 3.16-24) spells this out for us very clearly. We read that as Jesus laid down his life for us, so should we lay down our lives for each other. We are charged as 'little children': 'let us love in truth and in action'.

But besides being Good Shepherd Sunday, today is also Vocations' Sunday - a day on which we are each invited to think afresh about what it is God is calling us to be and to do. We are all created by God both purposely and purposefully. We are each chosen by God and he has a purpose for each and every one of us. Through Baptism, everyone within the church is specifically called to be a shepherd. All the baptised have a ministry, and 'ministry' is hugely diverse and takes many and hugely various forms.

The huge diversity of God's love is reflected in the enormous richness and diversity of the world and of the ministries to which we are called. We are ALL called to fulfil our small piece of the whole - to contribute to the building of God's Kingdom. We are cared for by God – by the Good Shepherd – yes. But we are also called to pass on that care to each and every one of God's children whoever and wherever they may be – and in our own particular way.

But there are dangers! Especially when we are attempting in our frail and broken way to care for others. It is all too easy to fall into the trap of caring for others for our own - and not their – wellbeing. Whose need are we meeting: theirs or ours? And it is also all too easy to believe that what we *want* to do is in fact what we are *called* to do. As often we are called into what seems to be beyond our strength and capability, and against our inclination, so we are called to trust in God's wisdom and strength not our own. And it is all too easy too, to look around us and be judgemental about other people's calling, or their response to their calling. God's love for us is unconditional and non-judgemental – and ours is to be the same.

So perhaps this morning we are being asked to look again at our calling? To ask: is God calling me to something new? It's never too late for that. Is he calling me to something seemingly impossible? Maybe something that is challenging us out of our comfort zone and into something new – new pasture, new opportunity, new ministry? One thing we can be sure of: whatever he is calling us silly sheep to do for him, God will always be there – right beside us as our good shepherd, to guide and protect us and to lead us gently in the right way, if we put our trust in him.

But Jesus gave us this picture of himself as our good Shepherd not just to give an exemplar of Christian life and pastoral care. It is also a warning – a warning to be on our guard against wolves and hired hands. It is worth noting that John places this morning's reading in his Gospel very carefully and deliberately alongside what he says about the Jewish feast of the purification, the festival of dedication of the Temple - a Temple that was at that time corrupt and the antithesis of 'Good Shepherding'. And a festival that on this occasion ended for Jesus, we are told, when 'the Jews took up stones again to stone him'.

The priestly families of the Temple at that time were wealthy, conservative and self seeking. They were subservient to the Romans, anxious to please *them* rather than serve their people, and were therefore generally very unpopular. They hardly lived up to the picture of pastors, shepherds of God's flock, which is constantly threaded right through the Hebrew Scriptures – the Old Testament.

So our reading this morning is an apt picture. The wolf may be seen as the Roman persecutor. And the hireling may describe the corrupt temple officials - the hireling who abandons the flock and flees to save his own skin from the wolf. So John, in leading us to contrast this picture with his picture of the True Good Shepherd makes the point even more forcibly. Maybe it's not that different today. Governments can be corrupt and self- seeking. Secular values can often be seen to override Christian values. We need to be prepared to stand up against the 'wolves' and the 'hirelings' of our time. Our collect (the prayer for this week) urges us 'to seek those things that are above' – to keep our eyes on the Good Shepherd and away from the values of the world; to keep our gaze on God, to see everything from his perspective - not that of the world around us.

Christ is the Good Shepherd who even lays down his life for his sheep - that ultimate sacrifice that brings us to the resurrection and the joy of Easter and of Risen life. That we re-enact, we remember in every celebration of this service of Holy Communion. That enables us to say – indeed to shout - with Bishop Desmond Tutu: 'We are an Easter people – and Alleluia is our song'. We are an Easter people – and Alleluia is our song. Alleluia. Amen.