

3rd May 2020, Fourth Sunday of Easter: John 10:7-18 – ‘The Good Shepherd’

Three years ago, on the second Sunday of 2017, we were about to start the 9.30am service at St Mary’s, when one of our welcomers came and found me urgently. ‘Come outside, you’ll want to see this,’ they said. So I hustled out and watched one of the more unusual sights I’ve seen in my 7 years here. Running along the road, and just passing the churchyard gate, were about 50 sheep.

We had no idea where they had come from or where they were going. I don’t think they had any idea where they were going either! There was great excitement – some wag commented that our flock had swelled considerably that day. But anyway we delayed the start of our service to work out what on earth we were going to do with them.

For lack of a better idea we decided to corral them in the school car park over the road from the church, and try and find out who the farmer was. A few willing souls stood on sentry duty. It actually took about 2 or 3 hours to get hold of someone by which time, the grass verges around the car park had certainly had a good trim from 50 grazing sheep, and the ‘hired hands’ were very cold. By lunchtime, the sheep were safely back in a nearby field.

What’s the moral of this story? ‘Never leave your gate open’ would be one of them. But more simply, **sheep need a shepherd**. Look what happens when a large flock is left to its own devices.

Jesus tells us today: ‘I am the good shepherd.’ Or to make it more personal: **‘I am *your* good shepherd**. I know you and you know me. You know my voice, you know that life is better with me, because my life is dedicated to you.’

In this season we need the reassurance of that voice perhaps now more than ever. To know that we have a good shepherd leading us through the chaos and uncertainty of this time, one who is totally dedicated to us, who walks with us and will never leave us, who comes to meet us where we are.

And we also need to know that **we are part of one flock, with one shepherd**. As nations co-operate to fight off the virus, so we are also uniting as a church as perhaps never before. I am conscious that today families will be logging in to watch this service together, often spread out across the country or even the world – something they’ve never been able to do before. I’ve heard many stories like this and I know that other ministers have shared the same with me. People are coming together in new ways: being one flock, with one shepherd.

And **our shepherd ultimately means to give us life – life in all its fullness**. The Greeks had two different words for ‘life’ – *bios* and *zoe*. ‘Bios’ means physical existence – simply being alive, breathing. ‘Zoe’ is real life – spiritual life, wellbeing, wholeness. This is the word Jesus uses here when he says that his purpose for us is abundant life – abundant *zoe*.

In this season *our governments have had to take drastic steps for the preservation of bios life* – to reduce casualties as much as possible. And they’ve done that acknowledging that *this has meant damage to our zoe life* – the things that make life worth living.

And what has been remarkable to see is how in this situation, we have all found ourselves craving what makes for true life, true zoe – relationships, community, the beauty of creation. And we have all tried to find ways to build as much of that as we can into our bios, our physical existence.

And that reminds me of two simple things to close with today. Firstly, **we are wired for zoe life.** It's built into our DNA, because we are made in God's image, so therefore we long for the same things God already has within himself. Even those who would not profess our faith long for deep relationship, strong community, fruitful lives and to rejoice in the beauty of our world.

We are all made for this kind of life and we all find ways to receive it. Perhaps it's only when some of it has been taken away that millions of us are realising just how much we always needed it. We've slowed down and suddenly we can see a vision of life opening up that we hadn't seen for a long time. This is the kind of life Jesus always planned for us, and some of us are recovering what that might mean, something we plan to carry on after this dreadful lockdown ends.

But secondly, and finally: **to really know this kind of wholeness, this abundant zoe life, we need to receive it from the one who made it – the Good Shepherd himself, Jesus Christ.** By God's grace we can all experience it in part: but the fullness is only found in Christ. He is the gate, he's the way to know this true life, he's the one who can plant it deep in our hearts. Without him, we get the temporary 'hired hands' version, not the real thing.

So today, let's give thanks for our Good Shepherd. Let's acknowledge our need for him, let's invite him to lead us again. And let's do that confident of this great truth: that his plan for us is true life, zoe life, life in all its fullness. Amen,