

Sermon for Sunday 21 April 2024

4th Sunday of Easter

By Richard Webster



Jesus the Good Shepherd

Bible Readings:

Readings Acts 4:5-12

⁵ The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. ⁶ Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. ⁷ They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: 'By what power or what name did you do this?'

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: 'Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹ If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹ Jesus is

*"the stone you builders rejected,
which has become the cornerstone."*

¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.'

John 10.11-18

11 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. 13 The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

14 'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. 17 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.'

Sermon

'I may be ewe, I may be ram

I may be mutton may be lamb

But on the hoof or on the hook

I bain't so stupid as I look

And a very good afternoon to you all, I apologise for having to ask you to work
.....

Fancy him knowing the p a a a assword

What lovely ma a a anners.....' *©

*© Dick King-Smith 'Sheep Pig'

My knowledge of sheep is limited to inventing new medicines to cure some of their diseases. I have seen them get better, and in some cases not.

I was once tasked with closing down one of our research farms and had to go and take a look round the site to see what we had. In the distance was a ewe lying on her back unable to get up. I and a colleague trudged across this muddy field, without wellies, to rescue her. We got her on her feet and off she ran without even a bleated thank you.

Most of us don't regularly work with sheep – certainly not as often as those who lived in Jesus' time when they would be widespread on the hillsides. When we imagine this rural idyl we conjure an image of lambs with their mothers gambolling in the fields on a bright sunny day. While in the fields the shepherds are calmly going about their business without a care in the world. We see a clean, light-skinned Jesus dressed in a white robe, carrying a lamb on his shoulders, or so the artists of the renaissance would have us believe.

But seeing Jesus as the Good Shepherd can be such a clichéd image. Was Jesus really a light skinned man dressed in clean white robes carrying a placid lamb. I think not. Being a shepherd is not a clean way of life and you certainly wouldn't be wearing white.

While sheep can be placid they are not easy to train. Unless you are Babe, the sheep-pig of our opening quote. They are simple, gentle animals who scare easily. You only have to walk across a field of sheep to see how they avoid you, unless you are bringing them food to eat. There maybe a few internal leaders in a flock – but the majority of sheep are happy to follow and they tend to follow the same tracks. They often have to rely on someone showing them the way through a gate or sheep dogs to encourage them. They can be skittish but most of the time they're quiet, with a few contented bleats – but if you've caught them, and they don't want to be caught, they can scream.

Sheep and shepherds would have been a common sight on the hills in Jesus's time. It would have been an occupation and skill picked up at an early age with the experience passed from one generation to the next. You will still see young children minding animals in many countries as part of the families' livelihood. It is a great responsibility being a shepherd not only are you looking after the welfare of your flock but also the welfare of your family. Sheep are both a source of food and clothing but also a tradeable commodity.

So what makes a good shepherd?

I would suggest 5 possible qualities that are necessary to being a good shepherd: He or she

- Guides – they will lead their sheep to good pasture and back to safety;
- Provides – they will ensure that their sheep have all that they need, especially food and shelter;

- Protects – they will do all that they can from guarding their flock from danger;
- Loves – they will give the loving care that their sheep need;
- Sacrifices – they are prepared to go the extra mile to secure all of this.

If you look up Psalm 23 you will see all of the above

- He guides me in the path of righteousness
- You prepare a table a table for me
- I will fear no evil for you are with me
- Surely goodness and love will follow me
- And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever

Jesus says I am the Good Shepherd whose knows his sheep, like any good shepherd should. He is responsible for his sheep unlike the hired hand who, having no personal interest in the flock, run away at the first sign of danger, or when they get a better offer of employment.

Jesus is prepared to lay down his life for his sheep. That's US. He is also prepared to go out and gather other sheep into the sheep pen.

'They too will listen to my voice and there shall be one flock'. Not only going out and spreading the gospel but perhaps a call for Christian unity?

There will have been sheep pens up on the hillside, without a physical gate. You can still see stone sheep pens in the hills of the Lake District and the Peak District etc. Simple stone circles which a shepherd could use to keep their sheep overnight or in an emergency. The Shepherd would sleep across the entrance to provide security. I understand that most of the time the usual practice was that the sheep would have been brought down from the hillside to a more robust gated pen with guards on the gate (see John 10 v 1-10)

So we are safe and all we need to do is rest up and let Jesus protect us. If only life were that simple and dare I say boring. Eat, sleep and follow the crowd.

We know that is not what Jesus would want us to do. Eat and sleep certainly but we are called to be active witnesses not passive, following the crowd of bystanders. Look at the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Peter and John are

hauled up in front of the Jewish religious leaders and asked to explain themselves. Clearly a night in jail did nothing to dampen Peter's spirits. Indeed being 'filled with the Holy Spirit' he gave a strong defence of why they were preaching about Jesus and his resurrection and healing the sick. This will have taken courage as he was in front of some of the most powerful religious leaders in the land. They would have known he was 'just' a fisherman. Yet he stood there and proclaimed that they had killed Jesus and yet God raised him from the dead. It was because of this that the crippled man had been healed. Not only that, Peter proclaims that it is only through Jesus that they can be made right with God.

Like Peter we are called to proclaim the good news of the gospel, in whatever situation we find ourselves in. Like the shepherd we are called to guide the lost, provide for the displaced and hungry, protect the vulnerable, Love everyone and lay our 'lives' on the line.

One final thought

If Jesus came today which occupation would he use as his example as the vast majority of people don't come across many shepherds in their day to day lives.

Perhaps he would talk about nurses and healthcare workers, volunteers for charities (Foodbank, Shelter.....name the ones you support), emergency services.....

Guide, Provide, Protect, Love, Sacrifice

'That'll do' said farmer Hogget to his sheep-pig. 'That'll do.' *©

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