



**Sermon preached by Dr Janet Bottoms on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2023**

**Readings: John 10: 1-10; Acts 2: 42-47; 1 Peter 2: 19-25. (Psalm 23)**

Despite the fact that most of us have little or no direct experience of sheep I think that we are all very comfortable with the well-known image of the shepherd and his sheep, so often an image of Jesus in popular iconography. We know that the business of the shepherd is to look after the sheep – to lead them to green pastures and still waters – that the Lord is our shepherd, and Jesus the “good shepherd”, who also “*lays down his life for the sheep.*”

Oddly though, as it seems to me, the authors of the lectionary chose to end this morning’s gospel reading before those famous words, which leaves me with Jesus drawing some less comfortable pictures, and an audience that, apparently, “*did not understand what he was saying to them*” by this “*figure of speech*”.

Why didn’t they understand? Surely they had heard it before. The Scriptures, the Old Testament writers, made use of the image, and it was in fairly common usage in the wider middle eastern world to denote a great ruler – but a ruler who cares for the people who are his responsibility. We can read in Psalm 78 of how God chose the shepherd boy, David, “*to be the shepherd of his people Jacob - of Israel his inheritance. With upright heart he tended them and guided them with skilful hand;*” and, most famously of all, the Israelites applied it to God - “*The Lord is my shepherd*”.

However, there are also Old Testament passages that give a less happy picture. In the book of Ezekiel, ch. 34, for example, we can read:

*“Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?*

and the accusation:

*You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.”*

So, declares the Lord,

*“I am against the shepherds, and I will demand my sheep at their hands. . . . I will rescue my sheep from their mouths . . . I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep,”*

This could be read as one of the prophecies of a future Messiah, God’s anointed. So when Jesus talks of sheep, and of the *stranger* whose voice the sheep do not recognize –

or the thieves who don’t enter the sheepfold by the gate but “*climb in another way*” –

do his audience really not understand him? Or is it that they understand too well?

We are not told who “*they*” are, but if we look back to the end of chapter 9 – remembering that chapter divisions are a much later imposition on the original texts – it becomes clear that some, at least, were the Pharisees with whom Jesus had been talking there; Pharisees who told a man who was born blind – and to whom Jesus gave sight, though on the Sabbath day -

“*Give glory to God, We know that this man is a sinner.*”; and “*We know that God spoke to Moses but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.*”

To this the formerly blind man answers boldly, “*We know that God does not listen to sinners*” - BUT – to give sight to a man born blind is unprecedented – unimaginable. “*If this man were not from God he could do nothing.*” The religious leaders won’t take this from him. “*You were born entirely in sin and are you trying to teach us?*” they say, and end by throwing him out of the synagogue – out of the community, in effect - but when Jesus hears of it he goes to find him. (You can find the whole story in John, ch.9.)

The sheep won’t follow a stranger – says Jesus – “*they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers*”, but they will follow their shepherd when he calls them “*because they know [they recognize ] his voice.*”

So what was it that the formerly blind man heard - “recognized” – in Jesus? Isn’t it the voice of the “good shepherd” - the voice of power\_and authority\_combined with a selfless love that gives – tirelessly- “*strengthening the weak; healing the sick; binding up the injured;*

*bringing back the strays; and seeking the lost.*” - the voice of the shepherd who will lead his sheep – who won’t expect them to go anywhere he is not willing to go before them, but will show them what is good, and then leave them to roam freely, to explore and learn and grow - safely – under his eye.

He will not hedge his sheep about with restrictions - with a version of the “Law” that has turned the positive command to love into the negative “you shall not” - and judged those who couldn’t live within the restrictions imposed on them. In fact he, himself, would break laws that imposed limitations on caring love. “*Compassionate and transgressive*” (a phrase I read somewhere and love) his is the voice of the shepherd who is willing, if necessary, to lay down his life for the sheep.

There is passage in the gospel of Matthew (ch.23) where Jesus cries woe to the scribes and Pharisees who “*lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in you stop them.*”

But, “I am the gate”, says Jesus, “*whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief – the false shepherd – comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*” Life, in all its fullness.

**And that is my “text”** today, in so far as I have one.

But what does Jesus mean by it? That we may trust our shepherd – trust his compassion, care and healing, and also his presence with us at all times, particularly difficult ones?

That is good – and better than the world can give – but is it abundant life? Fullness?

There comes a point , I think, when the shepherd and sheep analogy fails; and that point comes after the death and the resurrection of Jesus, our shepherd. As we can read at the beginning of the first letter of Peter, “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*” A living Hope – living, looking forward, moving forward in hope toward the coming kingdom of God. It’s is a calling to action, positive action, in his name; and no longer just as sheep but shepherds, too. “*Feed my sheep*”, Jesus says to Peter; care for my flock And with this comes a new sense of freedom to be and to act, as Jesus was and acted, “compassionate and transgressive” in the face of the limits the world seeks to impose.

The first reaction of Jesus’s disciples to his death was to huddle together – like sheep - to try to recreate what they had lost by appointing someone else to take the place of Judas and make

their number back to what it has been. And they prayed - but what happened next was not something they prayed for or could have imagined – not their idea at all.

In fact they were overwhelmed by it – by a “take-over” as it were, of the Holy Spirit, by the way Peter rose to the challenge, and the sheer scale of what followed: “*Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved,*” as our reading from Acts tells us. Moreover “*all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.*”

This could not continue – not in that kind of way, on that kind of scale – but it was the first outworking of the “new commandment” Jesus had given them, “*that you love one another as I have loved you.*” And it was new kind of “loving”, without discrimination, without prejudice: rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Samaritan and Greek, “*all one in Christ*” learning how to “*love one another*”. Looking outward and into the future with “a living Hope.”

From the beginning it was counter-cultural – transgressive – and very challenging, and it would cause heart-searching and some break-aways in the future, but they prayed and searched and taught and argued their way through the problems that arose, the instinctive hesitations and the social prejudices of the cultures into which the Word spread. Masters and slaves, women and men, on terms of equality, breaking bread together and greeting one another, as Paul instructed the church in Rome, “*with a holy kiss*”. Life in a new, amazing, disturbing - perhaps frightening - “fullness”, As the writer of John’s gospel put it “*For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*”

But they would have to learn, too, that this rejection of the social norms of the people they lived among would be disturbing, especially to the powerful and prosperous, just as the actions of Jesus had disturbed and threatened the beliefs and the power of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. So the early followers of the risen Christ found themselves living, as Peter put it, like “foreigners and exiles” in their own lands. They were seen as a suspicious presence, even potential rebels, by their neighbours, while at the same time Peter acclaimed them as “*a chosen race, a holy nation, God’s own people*”, called to proclaim “*the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*”

Yet according to Peter their high calling did not give them the freedom to do as they liked.

“*As servants of God*” he wrote, “*live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil*”; and if they were persecuted, or abused, or beaten unjustly they must endure it, patiently, “*For it is to your credit, if, being aware of God, [conscious of God’s presence ?] you endure pain while suffering unjustly. . . . for to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you should follow in his footsteps.*”

Called to this? To suffer injustice patiently, without resentment, without bitterness. Is this still “*life in all its fullness*” – “*a living hope*”? – a *marvellous light* ? The translation in the Bible we use is certainly uninspiring. “*To your credit*”; “*God’s approval*”. Our English language is inadequate; but the Greek word used here is actually *Xaris* - Grace - a word that in ordinary use meant goodwill, kindness, or mercy – but in its spiritual sense has been described as spiritually as “*divine influence on the heart*” – as the Spirit shaping our spirits - and, with a double action, as “*the good will of God towards us, and the good work of God in us*”. “*Grace upon grace*”, it is a gift, the marvellous gift of God; the knowledge that God is with them and blessing them to the man or woman who suffers for, and in the name of Jesus, who “*When he was abused, did not return abuse; when he suffered, did not threaten; but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. . . . so that, free from sins, we might live for*

*righteousness*". It is the Grace of salvation, *"For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls."*

To be beaten unjustly – to be persecuted for your faith – or to be rejected by former friends; to suffer from the prejudices or unthinking scorn of those who believe in their own rightness, their own "truth" because that was what their upbringing or culture taught them; any of these, now as then, can hurt, make us shrink inside ourselves, shake or even destroy our confidence in our Living Hope. As followers of Jesus we have a responsibility to care for, encourage, and pray for such sufferers in his name, especially for those who are alone or new in their faith in Christ.

However, I think we also have a responsibility to sincerely examine ourselves from time to time; to examine our own prejudices, the unquestioned assumptions of our own culture, or the judgments about others that we may almost unconsciously make because they are not like us.

We must question, sometimes, whether by our actions or words we may be imposing our own limitations or limits on someone else, or holding them back, or even turning them away from experiencing, for themselves, the love, the healing and the grace of God - life in all its fullness, its hope, its strength and its freedom.

As the writer to the Philippians said, *"Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Jesus Christ. . . . for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."*

What a challenge – but what fullness, grace upon grace, what a living hope it opens to us.

Thanks be to God Amen.