



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Sunday 22 November, St Cecilia's Day, 2020

Readings: Ezekiel 34.11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1.15-23; Matthew 25.31-46

For many, maybe for you, the second lockdown is not emotionally straightforward. We are aware that there is a marked increase in severe illness and mortality, that there are hastening economic consequences leaving thousands without jobs, incomes and fearing for their homes, that places of education and of healing are working at stressfully full tilt, and that many students have had a hard start to their university careers, and that life's stage has a fractious political backdrop, whether we ourselves are politically engaged or not. We find ourselves stirred to deep and genuine sympathy.

Alongside such real crises, for most of us, our lives are steady and safe, yet many speak of feeling a permanent dis-ease, which includes anxiety about how the coronavirus itself is playing out, concern for the cohesion of society as it for so long lives with unwelcome restrictions, and awareness of the impact of so much uncertainty upon our equilibrium. And knowing this dis-ease can make us feel all the more complicated when we consider how much more critical some people's situations are. 'How can I feel downcast, when others have so much more to bear?' The second lockdown is indeed not emotionally straightforward.

Time and again the Bible's backdrop is also one of troubling times. They may be political, social or natural disasters, but frequently there are what the prophet Ezekiel characterises as days 'of clouds and deep darkness'. (34.12) Earlier, Israel had clamoured for a king. Some monarchs had reigned justly and in peace, but others were distinguished by corruption and self-interest, ineptitude, brutality and failure. Typically at that time, leaders, both religious and secular, were often spoken of as shepherds. Just before we joined his prophecy, Ezekiel had been lambasting these shepherds, who have been feeding themselves when they should have fed their sheep. (34.2) They've neglected the weak and sick, the lost and injured, and ruled with 'force and harshness'. (34.4) The prophet seems pointedly to be asking, 'Do you shepherds live *off* the flock, exploiting them for your own indulgence and ambition, or do you live *for* the flock, caring, protecting, building them up, fashioning a community of mutual love?

Just as much as in our day, it is a pitfall of leadership, that we can become more self-serving than self-emptying. Those of us in political or religious leadership need to hear and heed the call to be better shepherds, living not off those we lead, but living for them.

So it is that Ezekiel hears of God being moved by this disappointment in the nation's leaders. Instead, says the Lord, God will be their shepherd, and lead the people to 'lie down in good grazing land', whilst the leaders will be fed with their just desserts. (34.14-16) As elsewhere in the Scriptures, Ezekiel is offering a powerful image of God as determinedly compassionate, when the people are up against it. Likewise today, the Church inherits that prophetic vocation to speak loudly and clearly into our world of

dissonance and need, bringing the message about the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's a message of hope, hope that in all things – even in this thing through which we are living - God will work out a good and loving purpose. (cf Ephesians 1.15ff) As I have said before and want never to tire of saying, 'hope migrates'. It moves us like a strong wind – the wind of God's Spirit - through the clouds and deep darkness, into a place that's new and renewing.

But 'to hope' is not a verb to be used solely in the passive voice. The believer in God's saving grace and truth doesn't just sit back to enjoy it – though it is wondrous and to be savoured. Hope also bequeaths a lifestyle, whereby we're called to become embodiments of that divine love which births hope. To sustain Ezekiel's analogy, each of us is urged to become a good shepherd ourselves, caring for the weak and sick, the injured and lost, and those to whom the pandemic is doing its worst.

It is telling that the lectionary chooses to bring to a close the church year with the rich parable Sandra read for us. Before we start to tell the Jesus story all over again next week, when we'll reach Advent Sunday, *this* year's telling of it is summed up with this haunting suggestion that every good work we do to someone around us is something we do to Jesus. When we give ourselves passionately to sneer at Covid-19 by feeding the hungry and slaking the thirsty, by welcoming the stranger and clothing the naked, by caring for the sick and visiting the imprisoned, we are singing our songs of worship to Jesus the good shepherd – to Jesus who not only knows the names of each and every sheep, but even gave his life for them, dying that they might live. That, the Gospel suggests, is true kingship.

In Helen Odell-Miller's world, music therapy can be offered to us when we are in need. It's more than basking in music's beauty – it is taking music's beauty and using it to soothe, to restore, to mend, to enable us to lie down in green pastures. I believe that I can speak for the musicians who have tirelessly sustained Downing Place Church's worship throughout lockdowns 1 and 2, when I say that what they give us is not performance but ministry. It is the offering back of the gift which they have received, to become a gift beyond words for accompanying us through this cloud and darkness; music to accompany us on a journey through consolation into healing and wholeness. It is hope in music.

And in this, music is but one example. There are countless other ways of living out hope so that it makes a difference. I think of November's Monthly good Cause for Downing Place Church, *Camfed*. The Campaign for Female Education has a profound effect upon health and development in rural Africa. I think of *Foodbank*, a down to earth, hope-embodiment response to the 20% of the UK population living below the poverty line. These and a host of causes like them, sing loud and clear the enduring melody of God's love. They *are* symphonies of God's shalom.

So it is that for me, the emotional complexity of the pandemic is strangely eased this St Cecilia's Day as we each enjoy that enduring melody of God's love, and sing its hope filled airs. And if all of this has passed you by, then you might prefer simply to hum to yourself, 'The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want'. Even to do just that can lead us the quiet waters by.

May it be movingly so, and as Bach would have it, *solī Deo Gloria*, to God alone be the glory.