



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 25th April 2021

Readings: Acts 4.5-12, I John 3.16-24, John 10.11-18

It is entirely logical for the Fourth Gospel to highlight Jesus describing himself as the good shepherd.

The idea of shepherds and shepherding was a familiar image for an agrarian economy. People would have understood the role of a shepherd. Maybe they would have grasped something of the detail of how shepherds knew each sheep and lamb in their care; how they would be on hand to assist at lambing time; how with rugged courage they would put themselves at risk to care for them; how they would give special attention to the more needy; and even how they would go out of their way in search of those who wandered off and needed rescuing. If we are amongst the millennia of people who see themselves as sheep relating to the Lord as a Shepherd, there is demonstrably a winsome appeal to such ideas.

For Jesus to be described as ‘the good shepherd’ was also rich in *political* and *religious* terms. The scriptures that his followers knew often described monarchs as shepherds – good ones were honoured, as was God, the King of kings, of whom Isaiah says, ‘[The Lord] will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.’ (40.11) At the same time, poor monarchs were castigated for being like shepherds who feed themselves rather than their ‘sheep’. (Ezekiel 34.2) And, as we just sang, the Hebrews’ liturgical poetry famously uses shepherd language in one of its most intimate verses, ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures.’ (Psalm 23.1)

Given the last few weeks’ Easter-speak of empty tombs and of angels, of a previously dead man walking through locked doors, and of fingers being placed in his wounded side, this shepherd imagery is engagingly straightforward and accessible. I was sharing with the Open Table Bible Study group recently, how Rowan Williams’ candidly recognises the challenge of resurrection talk: ‘It is’, he writes, ‘an event on the frontier of any possible language, because it is the moment in which our speech is both left behind and opened to new possibilities.’¹ (*Resurrection* 1982, page 97) So it is that in these post-Easter days, when we are grappling with what it means to believe in the risen Christ, there is something familiar and reassuring about his self-identification as the ‘good shepherd’.

That said, for many today shepherds are not part of our daily lives in quite the way they were for Jesus’ contemporaries. Although I grew up as a country boy, surrounded by fields of swaying corn and mooing cows, there was not a sheep in sight. Maybe in the world of the internet, artificial intelligence and processed food, we need to find for our era language about Jesus that is as immediate now as shepherds were then. Most buildings have foundation stones upon which the edifice is built and from which everything else grows, and they frequently have cornerstones, that crown the whole and hold it together, but I wonder how many of us know much about those, either.

So what would be a helpful modern image, reflective of today’s culture? What language shall we borrow?

The Lord is my barista? Well, it’s a familiar role. Not long ago there were 150,000 of these coffee connoisseurs in the UK, and in 2017 *The Times* was lamenting a barista shortage that threatened to

¹ Williams, Rowan 1982 *Resurrection: interpreting the Easter Gospel* London: Darton, Longman and Todd page 97

bring coffee shops ‘grinding to a halt’.² But familiar though the image might be, ‘the Lord is my barista’ lacks so much that is conveyed by shepherd. After all, even if one has a daily chat with a particular barista whilst waiting the preparation of one’s *grande decaf single shot soya latte with sugar free caramel and extra dairy free cream to go*, the conversation tends to be superficial, brief, and coffee specific.

So how about ‘the Lord is my research scientist’? Well, where would we be without them? How this year has awoken even the least scientific amongst us to the place of research science in the nation’s life. We cannot but honour those without whom no vaccines would have been developed, less still administered. And I for one find myself more aware than ever that research scientists are crucial to the development of twenty-first century society, as, alongside medicine, they make progress with diet, pollution, genetics, evolution and dark matter. But does ‘the Lord is my research scientist’ have potential to connect with Joseph and Joanne Public in the way that ‘the Lord of my shepherd’ does? I have my doubts.

So, might ‘the Lord is my teacher’ crack it? As with all analogies, one looks at an idealised form of it ... there are, of course, bad teachers, just as there are bad shepherds. But a *good* teacher is an image with which few of us are unfamiliar. I think of Mrs Crampton and Mr Trustcott and Mrs Booth at Primary School, and at Secondary School of Mr Hill (always known as Benny), Mr Shrimpton, and even the blackboard-rubber-flinging Miss Leaf. They knew their students. They held their students to account, yet also forgave them, offering a second chance, and even a third, a fourth or a fifth. They persisted with their students, whether relentlessly to drive onwards the brighter or to get the best out of the weaker. And when there were apparent special educational needs, they offered a special educational insight.

From experience, I find much in the idea of the Lord as my teacher. That’s unsurprising - it’s profoundly Biblical. That longest psalm, 119, has repeated notions of the Lord graciously teaching the law (v29) and the statutes (v16). The ordinances the Lord teaches are sweeter than honey to the mouth (v103). Indeed, they are the very thing that corrects the one who has gone astray like a lost sheep. (v176). How frequently Jesus himself is found teaching – in the synagogue (Mark 6.2), on the hillside (Matthew 5.2) and even in the temple (John 7.14). ‘The Lord is my teacher’ is fundamental to the ministry of this one who comes to show us the Father. So much so that, when the Fourth Gospel tells of Jesus preparing his disciples for the time after he has gone, he promises another will come in his wake. It’s ‘the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, [to] teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.’ (John 15.26) The Lord is my Teacher.

Remember last week’s sermon from St Peter (Acts 3.17), in which he acknowledged that Jesus’ crucifixion was because people ‘acted in ignorance’. Well, such is the challenge *we* face. Ours is a generation that maybe entirely well-intentioned and benevolent, and canny about so much, but statistically, it is less well-informed about how Christianity trusts in God as the ‘source, guide and goal of all that is’. (Romans 11.36 New English Bible) That is why there is a pressing need for communities of Christian faith to commit their resources of time, of money and of personnel to ensuring that those who look to the Lord as their teacher are not disappointed. How blessed we are as Downing Place Church to have people who will facilitate House Groups – thank you Janet, Penny, Maureen and Sheila, Helen, Rosemary and David, Elizabeth, Li, the other David and the other Janet who have all enabled such learning since we came together in a single fellowship. How blessed, too, to have the new exploration of *Lectio Devina*, where scriptural reading, meditation and prayer lead to an increase in knowledge of God’s word – thank you Deborah and William for making that happen. And the Open Table Bible study – what a precious hour that is every fortnight, as nine or ten of us have explored Philipians, Hosea and Mark and soon will turn to Ruth – thank

² Available at <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/barista-shortage-threatens-to-make-coffee-shops-grind-to-a-halt-6tdptn3j#:~:text=There%20are%20about%20150%2C000%20baristas.hamper%20the%20industry's%20growth%20projections>. Accessed 16th April 2021.

you, Alison for inspiring and enabling that as a child of the first lockdown. Ignorance is no sin, but nor does it have to be. The Lord is my teacher, I shall not want.

If you prefer not to lose the idea of the Lord as Shepherd, then that's you and me both. Please do not hear me belittling that. The Lord is indeed *my* shepherd, and I am persuaded that I shall not want. Moreover, it seems to me that part of Jesus's shepherding is precisely what he teaches me:

that God's will for us is life in all its fulness;

that God's purpose for us is partnership with God in God's mission;

that God's call to us is to love God with all we are and our neighbour as ourselves;

that God's promise to us is to be with us in the life and for us to be with God 'when this heart and flesh shall fail. And mortal life shall cease'.

If that is what God would have us learn from the good Shepherd, then the Lord is indeed my teacher; I shall not want. he becomes the cornerstone upon which everything is built and by which it is held together.

Thanks be to God.