

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; **John 10:1-10**

(Jesus said) 'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday: you may be able to guess why!

Our first reading from the book of the Acts of the Apostles presents a somewhat idealised account of the early church. Whether the church was really like that in its earliest days, and many commentators agree that it probably wasn't, this is the way the writer we know as Luke wants his readers to understand that the church should be. We are told that the believers shared everything in common, sold off land and possessions and gave the proceeds to those in need so that nobody was disadvantaged. They worshipped together with glad and generous hearts.

We all enjoy moaning and whinging about paying tax and rising prices and for many people every price increase is a real worry, particularly right now when so many are unemployed. So how are we to have glad and generous hearts? What does that mean for us, in this church community, today?

Our gospel reading presents Jesus as both our shepherd and the gate to the sheepfold: he is the way to eternal life and the one we can confidently follow on our journey. The imagery is an echo of Psalm 23, as the shepherd leads us safely through the darkest times into sunshine and the heavenly banquet.

As sheep trust the shepherd who cares for them, so we can trust Jesus to love and care for us.

Trust is the key; those early believers trusted God and trusted the teaching of the Apostles about Jesus, so they were able to share what they had with one another without fretting about the future. Notice that their trust led them to act: they didn't just pray and ask God to provide for the poor, they also did something about it themselves. They took responsibility for caring, as they understood Jesus had taught them.

We know that the early church was not perfect from what Luke goes on to tell us in the Book of Acts. We also know from Paul's letters that there were all kinds of problems in the early churches: leaders fought among themselves, people argued and complained, some left in a huff- nothing much has changed, has it?

But that shouldn't stop us from aiming high and doing our very best to be the church God longs for us to be. We have been given so much: how can we not have glad and generous hearts?

There are many ways we can care for one another and share our goods, and if we listed the ways this already happens in this parish it would be a good list.

People give their time: looking after the church buildings, gardens and grounds. People give their talents: doing the accounts and admin work, Sunday School, music, leadership. And people give their treasure: giving money to missions and charities and to the church. There are all the regular donations to Carad, the Balga breakfast club, and other appeals during the year.

Then there are the quiet, private acts of kindness and selflessness that we don't hear about: the meals cooked and given to folks who are self-isolating; the phone calls and caring conversations, as people look out for friends and neighbours. I thank God for the people who are maintaining connections and continuing to care for fellow parishioners during this time that we cannot meet.

There are many, many ways in which people give of themselves with great generosity to the work of this parish and to God's kingdom in the wider world.

We are blessed by their work, which is valued and necessary, but we must not forget that it is all about doing; and following Jesus is about being as well.

The early church met together and shared their resources so everyone had enough to eat, but they met primarily to devote themselves to the apostles teaching, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers.

If we really are God's own people, if Jesus is our shepherd, and if we truly want to follow him, then we need to pray as well as perform, worship as well as work, and spend time with the scriptures as well as spending time volunteering.

Jesus said he came that we may have life, and have it abundantly. Abundant life is found when we balance work and play, exercise and rest, giving and receiving. An abundant life pays attention to physical, spiritual and emotional needs because neglecting one will affect the whole person.

As we remember that we are Easter people, let us celebrate with glad and generous hearts as our risen Lord leads us.

The Lord be with you.