

EASTER 4B 25-04-2021 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Acts 4:5-12; Ps 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

John 10.11-18

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

1 John 3.16-24

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Today is often known as Good Shepherd Sunday: if you can't guess why, then you weren't listening to our reading from John's Gospel! The context of this passage is that Jesus is speaking after he had healed a man who was born blind. The Pharisees were suspicious of Jesus because he had healed on the Sabbath, and they cross-examined the healed man and his parents and then drove him out.

When he heard about this, Jesus went to find the man, who expressed his belief in Jesus: but the Pharisees did not. Then chapter 10 begins with this speech as Jesus describes himself as the gate for the sheep, who came to give abundant life to the sheep.

The metaphor changes as Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd, who is prepared to die to care for his sheep because he loves them so much. The idea of good rulers and kings being described as shepherds was common in ancient Israel: Moses was looking after sheep when he came across the burning bush, and the great King David started out as a shepherd boy.

We are familiar with the image of the Good Shepherd because many of us have grown up with it; we may have memories of Sunday school pictures of Jesus- usually with long fair hair and blue eyes- wearing a white robe, holding a staff in one hand and a fluffy white lamb in the other.

Real first-century Hebrew shepherds would have been grubby, dark-skinned and weather-beaten men who slept in their clothes and were probably more than a little rough around the edges. But then, sheep don't stay cute little lambs for long either: they quickly grow up to be smelly, daggy, stupid animals.

So if Jesus is our good shepherd and we are his sheep, what does that say about us? Are we so dumb that, as it says in Psalm 23, we need to be told to lie down or to drink from the still waters?

We think of sheep as unquestioning followers who have hardly got a brain-cell between them and certainly couldn't make their own decisions- which is not how we would or should see ourselves.

I don't think the gospel writer intended his readers to compare themselves to silly sheep. John is telling us about who Jesus is- his whole gospel sets out to make sure we know that Jesus is the Son of God- and so this passage tells us about the identity and characteristics of Jesus as The Good Shepherd.

David and other kings were described as shepherds but Jesus is the Shepherd par excellence. Jesus is the one who brings new life, who loves us more than any other.

We can learn something about ourselves from the image of the flock, however. We learn that we need one another, we need to be together and to love one another because we all belong to the one flock: and we learn that others will be brought into the flock as well.

As the theologian Karl Barth said, there is no legitimate private Christianity: the life of faith is to be lived in community. Jesus calls us into relationship with him and with the church. The community of faith is our primary reality; even as Jesus knows each of us individually, the community is our proper context and where we belong.

We live in a society that prizes the individual and tells us that religion is a personal choice, one of many. We are free to 'shop around', and the market-place is full of churches and denominations and religions and spiritualities all clamouring for our attention. We can pick the good bits out of several different ones if we want to, and many people do. Have you heard people say things like, "I'm not religious, I don't go to church, but I'm very spiritual"? What does that actually mean? I think it's a cop-out.

I once heard a comedian declare that people who say they are 'spiritual' are really saying they're scared stiff of dying but can't be bothered to go to church!

In the first letter of John, the writer tells us that Jesus laid down his life for us, which is just what Jesus said the Good Shepherd does.

Then the writer goes on to tell us that we should lay down our lives for one another, asking how we could claim to be filled with God's love while we ignore the needs of others. We are to love not in word or speech, but in truth and action. As it is claimed that St Francis said, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary use words."

What does that mean for us? What kind of action is he on about? I imagine it might mean something different for each person, but basically it comes down to kindness. If you buy extra at the shop for CARAD, or save money to give to an aid agency, or cook a meal for someone who's not well- that's love and kindness in action. Actions like these really can speak louder than words.

What about those times when we are the needy ones? When we are sick, or in constant pain, or worried, or grieving- where do we turn?

Psalms 23 has given comfort to countless people. It is sung or said at funerals for good reason, because it reassures us that God is always with us and always will be, throughout life and beyond death.

The darkest valley or the shadow of death, however we imagine it, describes the human experience of fear and darkness- and this psalm tells us that the Shepherd is there to protect and care for us.

This is the Good News: that the Great Shepherd of the sheep loves all humankind and all of creation in any and every circumstance.

May we always remember the vision of our Shepherd, living our lives in love for God and one another and caring for the world and all who share it.

The Lord be with you.