

'I am the gate of the sheepfold' & 'I am the good shepherd'.

'Two men were called on in a large classroom, to recite the Twenty-third Psalm to students. One was a professional orator trained in speech technique and drama. He repeated the Psalm in a powerful way. When he finished, the class cheered and even asked for an encore that they might hear his wonderful voice again. Then the other man repeated the same words--'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...' But when he finished, no sound came from the large class. Instead, the students sat very still and a deep mood of silence prevailed. At that point the first man stood to his feet. 'I have a confession to make,' he said. 'The difference between what you have just heard from my old friend, and what you heard from me, is this: I know the Psalm, my friend knows the Shepherd.'

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday when we consider Jesus as the Good Shepherd and ourselves as his sheep. Our Gospel portion this morning comes from St John Chapter 10 yet when we think of the Shepherd and Sheep analogy, it is inevitable perhaps that we think of Psalm 23 above every other Bible passage. Indeed this Psalm is perhaps particularly dear to our parish, ever since we took part in the Bible Society's Psalm 23 Garden Project, now on hold until Chelsea 2021.

Psalm 23 is one of those bible passages that has been ingrained in our collective memories as a nation. In fact, it is one that people know everywhere, one that transcends us all, and is used especially at funerals.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me. Psalms 23:4

Indeed it is still rare that anyone who has even the most remote Christian background is laid to rest without Psalm 23 being recited, and it brings us so much comfort especially at times such as the present circumstances in which we find ourselves to be walking in. Yet I cannot help thinking that there is so much more to this wonderful Psalm than for it to be used simply as a refuge in times of trouble. For me the most important verse is the first: ***The Lord Is My Shepherd, I Shall NOT Want*** (Psalm 23:1). That's because it's really important that we learn to trust in the Lord as our shepherd when things are going along in our lives just fine so that when they seem to go wrong we know that we can still depend upon Him.

So what according to Jesus does a 'good shepherd' look like? Firstly, a good shepherd is one whose voice the sheep will recognise and trust to keep them safe. Unlike the shepherds on our English hillsides who drive their flocks from behind, Middle Eastern shepherds lead their sheep from the front. So a shepherd in Jesus'

day needed to know his flock intimately. At night time when they returned from the pastures they had grazed upon that day, flocks were often inter-mingled in a common fold. Their shepherds didn't worry about this however, because when it was time to leave each shepherd issued his own distinctive call – a special trill or whistle or tune on a reed pipe – and that shepherd's sheep withdrew from the crowd to follow their master. Indeed shepherds knew their flocks so well that they often had individual names for each and every sheep. Jesus then is like a good shepherd because he knows his own by name, and they know that they can trust him to keep them safe.

Secondly, a good shepherd, according to Jesus, protects and is prepared to lay down his life for the sheep. Again, in Jesus' day shepherds themselves would lie across the open entrance to the sheep fold at night to keep both the sheep in, and the wild beasts out. The entrance was the only legitimate way into the sheep fold, since any other entry involved climbing over the wall, a route taken by thieves. Thus Jesus makes it clear that he chooses to lay down his life for us – his death is not the result of an accident or unfortunate circumstances which sweep him along against his will – it is freely chosen and the result of a deliberate decision made by him.

Moreover for Jesus a good shepherd, unlike a hired hand, would never desert his sheep. Having referred to himself as a caring shepherd and therefore the one whom the sheep rightly trust to keep them safe and lead them to good pasture Jesus tosses a final insult towards the religious leaders of his day. He implies that they were nothing more than hired hands. Therefore says Jesus it's not surprising that the sheep failed to listen to these religious leaders, who dupe them with false promises – those Pharisees and Sadducees who abused their responsibilities by having an eye on their own gain at the people's expense. In contrast Jesus gives up his own life on their behalf.

If Jesus is the 'good shepherd' then what does a 'good' sheep look like? I would suggest that a 'good sheep' listens, trusts, and follows Jesus' voice. First then '**listening**'. As I always tell the children at Finch. school we are given two ears and only one mouth for a good reason! And even during a 'lock-down' it can be very hard amongst all the contradictory voices and claims on our time - to listen for, and to hear Jesus' voice. Indeed it can be especially hard when the going gets tough, and the way ahead uncertain. That's why spending time both individually and (usually collectively) in trying to discern Jesus' voice is so crucial to our faith. It's fundamentally obvious that if we want to hear Jesus speak, we need to learn to recognise his distinctive voice, through spending time reading his word, gathering

with the rest of the flock to worship him, and praying and listening out for his still small voice of guidance amidst the noise of everyday living.

Second, '**trusting**'. Choosing to respond to Jesus' call also involves the challenge to trust that the good shepherd is leading us to green pastures even if the way ahead looks steep and barren. For many in our land at present the way ahead looks very tough and bleak and it can be terrifying especially if we fail to hear Jesus' voice amidst all the clamour. And that's why we need faith – in order to trust, even when everything else is telling us to abandon all hope. And the way to do it is 'to follow' Jesus through thick and thin – in other words to persevere.

So third – '**following**' or **persevering**. Jesus promises that when we follow him we will not be penned in but set free, known by his name and safe in his care. We need to remember that the church is like the sheepfold – its purpose is as a shelter to which we must return and rest. But most of the time the sheep are in open pasture – the world outside – and it is there that they are mostly nourished not in the fold. The sheep need to go out to find their sustenance and since the pasture outside the sheepfold is a wilderness, that may not be an easy task. It's so easy to forget this crucial part of Jesus' teaching, and to keep our churchgoing in one package and the rest of our week in another. But the whole point of our faith is to make a difference in the way in which we live out our lives, and to trust Jesus to help to lead us to places where we are needed, and where perhaps unexpectedly we will be nourished.

It is as T.S.Eliot writes in his poem '**The Rock**'

There shall always be the Church and the World
And the Heart of Man
Shivering and fluttering between them, choosing and chosen,
Valiant, ignoble, dark and full of light
Swinging between Hell Gate and Heaven Gate.
And the Gates of Hell shall not prevail.
Darkness now, then
Light.

My prayer this Good Shepherd Sunday would be that we might always listen for the voice of Jesus, respond to his call, and trust him enough to follow him to whatever pastures he chooses to lead us to, secure in the knowledge of his care and protection all the days of our lives, and that at length we will 'dwell in the house of the Lord for ever'. (Ps 23)