

The fourth Sunday of Easter

Our Gospel reading today is John 10:1-10

There is no better known image of Jesus than that of the Good Shepherd. It is worth taking a moment to consider what shepherds were about when these words were spoken. The Judean plateau is for the most part rough and stony, more suited to pastoral farming than agriculture. The shepherd was a familiar sight and his life was hard.

There were no enclosed fields, sheep would wander far and wide searching for grass in a hot dry climate. Not only were there ever present dangers due to the tough landscape but the shepherd had also to be constantly on the watch for wild animals and robbers. The shepherd's staff was as much a weapon as a tool.

Jesus also had in mind the ancient image of God as the Shepherd of his people which included the often hostile reception given to those who spoke out for justice and righteousness. When he speaks of those who seek to destroy the flock he understood all too well the purveyors of false truths and fake news. Those whose words went with the easy way. The voice of prophecy by contrast nearly always went against the grain. It still does.

A Palestinian shepherd knew his sheep. They were not bred for meat but for wool. The shepherd lived with his sheep for years, he knew them by name, they knew him, they recognized his voice. This is about relationship and trust, earned the hard way.

The second image Jesus uses is less obvious, "I am the gate." In the open countryside shepherds built sheep folds, enclosures that did not have a door. At night the shepherd would call the sheep into the enclosure through a narrow opening and then he would lie across the opening to protect them. Any wild animal or bandit would have to go through the shepherd to get to the sheep. He literally make himself the gate to the enclosure.

This carries two messages. Firstly that Jesus is the way, it is through him that we find life. This echoes words spoken to Thomas when Jesus speaks of rooms in his Father's house. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." The second message is that Jesus deliberately and willingly puts himself in harm's way for the benefit of others.

There are many today who connect with that image of putting oneself in harm's way. We are getting used to queuing outside shops with someone at the door guiding and guarding our safety. It doesn't always go well. Outside a local pet store (I needed woodshavings for the bees) a lady was screaming at the chap standing there. Her language was abusive and aggressive, her fury due to the fact that they didn't have the right seed in for her budgie.

I'd just had a similar encounter with someone over a loose memorial stone so I felt for the guy. He looked ashen, when I commiserated with him he couldn't speak and had to walk away. A colleague stepped into his place. Standing in the doorway isn't as easy as it looks. These are hard times, we are seeing the best in some people but frustration and fear sometimes bring out the worst. I don't know what stresses and fears the angry person was experiencing but for it to explode over a packet of birdseed suggested something was eating at her. She will not be the only one.

The image of the Good Shepherd reminds us that there are bad shepherds as well. There are those who hurt and destroy. Being a shepherd was tough. Shepherding was a hard job and usually shepherds were despised. If something went missing it was always the shepherds who got the blame. In a court of law a shepherd couldn't be trusted to give evidence. Strange then that when

God wanted witnesses at the crib he made the mistake of calling shepherds. Maybe God doesn't see people as we see people. Maybe that's part of what 'new normal' is about.

We move towards a time when life will change again. Difficult decisions to make, there will be disappointments, frustrations, anger. The image of the shepherd is much more than just a cosy pastoral comfort, it is a decision, and a tough one.

We all stand in doorways. We can make opportunities happen, choose to enable others, look to the welfare and safety of someone else, discern between truth and mischief, support those who stand in harm's way. But we cannot do this without becoming involved. The shepherd literally makes himself the gateway. When Jesus opens the way to life, and life in all its fullness, he does not open a door and stand aside. He is the way. It seems his main concern was to encourage his friends to join in the journey than assure them of the destination.

That is a willingness set before us. To live as those who believe in a better way even though we do not have all the answers and cannot tell where we will end up. Sometimes the journey shapes the destination.

Church of England Prayer line

There are a wealth of online prayer resources both on the Church of England website and using various apps we have mentioned before (eg Daily Prayer by Aimer Media). These are all free to use with an internet connection. Daily Prayer is available as an offline version for £2.99 a year.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has now added a free telephone prayer resource – 0800 804 8044. Daily Hope offers prayers, reflections, music and full services for anyone who would prefer not to use a computer or tablet.