

John 10:11-18 - I am the good shepherd

Today's Gospel moves us from post-resurrection appearances to the nature of God's work in the world. The metaphor of Jesus being described as the good shepherd is a popular one and it has influenced the church's image of its leaders – in many traditions ordained ministers are referred to as “pastors”; part of a priest's role is pastoral care of his/her congregation. Priests are called to lead as Jesus led – to be the shepherd of the flock, in this case the congregation. This morning's text perfectly complements the best known of Psalms – Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd”. Shepherds in Christ's time would have found it hard work – they would be away from home for long periods; they would have to protect their sheep from predators such as wolves; they were outdoors in all weathers – hot days, cold nights. Their flocks were their livelihoods, and had to be cared for and protected. Jesus makes the difference between shepherds owning their flocks and those who were hired to do the caring and points out that the latter would not be so responsible, they would flee in the face of danger. It's another powerful image of how Jesus can always be relied upon to care for us in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. In previous verses, Jesus has described himself as the gate, though which the sheep will go to reach rich pastures; a metaphor to express how it is only by following Jesus that we can gain that richness of life that comes from being a part of God's kingdom.

The images of Jesus as the gate and the good shepherd are inextricably related – they reveal who Jesus is – and determine the how the community of faith will work; in this and similar discourses, Jesus' followers are not depicted as shepherds or even assistant shepherds; all who gather round him are identified as members of the flock, and are the ones whose relationship with Jesus is modelled on his relationship with God. Their faith in Jesus unites them, they take Jesus as their point of access to God and they receive life in abundance. The community knows that Jesus is willing to die for them, indeed does die for them – he expresses his love for them by his death. He did that for us. The discourse heard this morning calls us, as church, to live out our lives following the model Jesus sets us, a model rooted in mutual love as in the love between Jesus and God.

But Jesus doesn't only speak of his followers or flock in this passage. He refers to 'others'. When he spoke the words he would be referring to the Gentiles, and to the outcasts, those who were lost. His love was inclusive, and his mission as a Shepherd was to seek them out and bring them into his fold, to be part of his flock where they would recognise his voice and know that it meant security and love. Jesus wants us too to let his voice to speak through us as we reach out to those who are lost, hurting and vulnerable and bring them into the safety of our fold, our community, God's earthly kingdom, where they are to be made welcome and to feel secure.

We live in a society that values individualism and secularism and there may be times when we feel lonely, isolated, alienated or hopeless. We wander from the path, perhaps follow ways which seem easier for us. When we are going through these dark, rocky times, the Good Shepherd is there for us, responding to our need and offering an alternative to our despair if we only hear his voice and follow him through the gate, having the humility to let him lead us, and to be part of his flock. The ways in which he leads us might be difficult to understand sometimes, but we must trust in him.

Jesus' love for us is so great, and when we become part of his community, we rise above the self-centredness that can confine and narrow us, to the outgoing love which expands our hearts and minds and makes us grow more like him. Remember though, that Jesus' love for his flock was demonstrated by practical care. Sheep come to know the voice of the shepherd because it is the voice they've learned to associate with care, safety, warmth, food. They trust him in a crisis because he (or she) has proved trustworthy before in providing for their basic needs.¹ We have to live in the world demonstrating by our actions that we really believe that Jesus the Good Shepherd laid down his life to save us.

There is a wonderful reassurance to be found in Jesus as our Shepherd, borne out in the Easter message that Jesus returns to us and will never let us go.

¹ Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections Year B*