

Fr Tim's Sermon – Sunday 21st April 2024

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Readings:

Acts 4: 5-12

John 10: 11-18

What a lot seems to have changed in just a week!

When I stood here last week, we heard that wonderful Resurrection appearance from St Luke's Gospel, a moment of such hope, a moment when Jesus himself stood among his disciples and called them to do something. He called them to believe. He called them to trust. He called them to recognise him in his resurrected life. He called them to faithfulness.

Today we go back in the story, to chapter 10 of St John's Gospel, and we hear a very different side of the story.

Jesus tells his disciples that he is the good shepherd. This is a metaphor Jesus uses a number of times – and rightly so, because much of his ministry is among people of the land, farmers, shepherds, those who will understand metaphors to do with sheep.

It's a comforting story – the good shepherd is not like the hired hand, the good shepherd will do anything to protect the sheep – even to the point of laying down his life for them. Of course when Jesus spoke these words, his Crucifixion was still in the future, and perhaps this metaphor, this likening of himself to the good shepherd, didn't really come into its own until later.

But one day, St John, and others as well, will have remembered that Jesus said this. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I know my own and they know me. I have sheep in other fields as well, and I must bring them as well.

This is such a contrast with last week. Last week we heard the Resurrected Christ calling his disciples to come back, to believe and to trust. This week, Jesus isn't calling us to anything, but the action is all about him.

It was in Monty Python of course where it was recorded with certainty that "sheep are very dim" – apart from of course, the one sheep recognised as that most dangerous of animals – a clever sheep! The clever sheep is the one who realised that the sheep's life consists of standing around for a few months and then being eaten, and is trying to escape. But the rest of the sheep, apparently, are very dim.

Whether this is true or not, I have no idea, but it makes for good television!! But either way, sheep are the animals that Jesus uses, and for our purposes this morning, perhaps it is helpful to think of them as a bit dim.

There are the sheep, and then there is the shepherd. The good shepherd, who will stand firm when the wolf comes, who will risk everything, who will lay down his own life for the sheep.

This isn't the action of the sheep. This has nothing to do with whether the sheep put their faith and trust in the shepherd or not. This is the action of the shepherd, who will do absolutely whatever it takes to care for the sheep.

In St Matthew's Gospel, we read the story of the lost sheep, of the shepherd with a hundred sheep, one of whom goes missing. The farmer leaves the ninety-nine sheep on the mountains and goes in search of the one which has gone astray.

I'm not entirely convinced that this is good practice, and the risk to the ninety-nine sheep who are left without a shepherd is not insignificant, but perhaps we're not called to overthink this. The point of the story is that this shepherd, just like the shepherd in St Luke's Gospel, loves his sheep, and would do anything to protect them and have them home.

And the shepherd in St Luke's Gospel is Jesus. I am the good shepherd. I am the one who will one day lay down my life for my sheep. As indeed we now know, he did.

This reading gives us a powerful insight into the love of God, the care that he has for his people, and the role of Jesus in drawing his people home to God the Father. But why are we hearing it today, in the Easter season, in the midst of all the resurrection appearances, as we approach the feast of the Ascension.

It's good to be able to reflect today on our relationship with Jesus. We know we are his people, we know he calls us to himself, and, as we heard last week, we know that a Christian calling is a call to action, a call to doing all that Jesus teaches us to do.

But today we are reminded that relationships are two way things. As much as we are called to live in relationship with Jesus, he longs to live in relationship with us. It's all too easy, when we are asked to do anything, to reply – what's in it for me? Why should I do what someone is asking me to do, because I can't see what I will get in return.

It's not always about what we will get in return, sometimes doing the right thing might be more about helping others than making ourselves feel better. But we know, from Jesus this morning, that all that we do is part of our journey, and that as long as our journey leads us to him, then he will be ready to do all that it takes to call us home, to care for us, to protect us, yes, even to lay down his life for us.

Jesus bore the burden for all of humanity on the cross, and Jesus was raised back to life. Jesus gave up his life as a punishment for loving his people, and was raised to show that there is a new life for all his people.

This is the message of Easter, and as much as we are called to follow and to serve Jesus in our daily lives, we are reminded this morning that the relationship goes both ways, and that we have a Lord and God, a Shepherd, who will do whatever it takes to keep us, to shield us, to care for us and to love us.