

**Sunday 21st April 2024**

4th Sunday of Easter

**Acts 4.5-12**

**Psalm 23**

**1 John 3.16–end**

**John 10.11–18**

I am the Good Shepherd. It is such a well known image, I wonder, do you have a sense of a gentle, pastoral scene of a clean white robe and a cute baby lamb snuggled up in Jesus arms as he gazes into the middle distance across a landscape of gentle hills and rivers sparkling in the sunshine?

Hmm. Has anyone met a shepherd? Especially at this time of year, they are likely to talk about freezing muddy fields at 2 in the morning, noise and confusion and mess, danger and exhausting, back breaking work.

And that's today in England – let alone in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, when shepherds weren't exactly the obvious role models – we remember each Christmas, part of the point of the shepherds being given the good news of Jesus' birth was that they were outcasts, on the margins of society, the ones people forgot – maybe, in the words of our reading from Acts, the stone the builder's rejected. Easy to forget about the slightly disreputable, smelly folk living on the hillside –

This is the image Jesus chooses to explain who he was and what his mission was – pretty startling until we remember that Jesus spent a lot of his time trying to get rid of the triumphant, powerful ruler as the image of God.

Instead we have a much more humble picture, of a shepherd and his sheep, a mutual bond of affection – the sheep have learnt to recognise the voice they know they can trust and follow, a shepherd who is drawing in all the sheep so that there is one flock, one shepherd. A leader who is not just letting them loose to roam on their own, but to be with them, sharing their life.

And, because it is the Easter season, we might dwell for a moment on Jesus' own description of what was happening on the cross. We hear;

'I lay my life down for the sheep. I lay down my life in order to take it up again.' Notice here, that 'in order to' gives us the meaning, the reason for laying down his life – is so that he can take it up again. Our reading this morning begins at verse 11. Verse 10, ie in the same breath as Jesus says I am the good shepherd he says 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'.

And in case anyone is not sure about who the 'they' are, we hear, '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.'

There we have it. Jesus' actions are not limited. Jesus' purpose was for all. It seems to me this is echoed in those oh so familiar words of Psalm 23 – 'goodness and loving mercy shall follow me all the days of my life' – this rather marvellous image of God's limitless love pursuing us, longing to be with us and to pour out the riches of life.

The mystics describe God's desire is to be united in love with each of us – and this sense of the 'ultimate purpose' of God is at the heart of all creation. The letter from John gives us a further clue by that rather wonderful word 'abide'. We abide in God, and God abides in us- this mutual sense of resting in God's presence, abide means to stay with, to remain with – what remains constant in a rapidly changing world.

Jesus tells us in the Gospel that the sheep listen to his voice, this may be the constant that remains with us, that we are to give the space and time to do that, to listen to the true voice of the shepherd, with the humility that Jesus himself demonstrated. Not the shepherd in a snowy white robe petting the cute little lamb, but the shepherd who is up to his elbows in sheep dung and scrambling through bramble bushes looking for the one who no one else noticed. This is the Good Shepherd, the voice of love, the voice which resonates with the yearning of our hearts,

And so Jesus, as the stone the builders rejected, the outcast shepherd who cares for his sheep, stands for all those who have gone unnoticed, unregarded by the world but are infinitely loved and cared for by God.

This is something that connects to who we are at St Nicolas. When we gather together, we know that all are included in the love of God, we declare our openness to one another, to God and to the community – and we know that this is founded deep within the Gospel, when Jesus tells us, there is one flock, one shepherd – we know of course that does not mean we are all identical – far from it, God delights in our diversity – indeed it is in our very differences that we celebrate. I wonder how it felt to hear the words in our epistle today, from the first letter of John chapter 1? Let me remind you, that we are to love one another – in truth and action. This is the pattern set by our Good Shepherd, who loves and cares for all the sheep, our humble God whose concern is not for status or power, but in the well being and flourishing of all the flock, and asks us to do the same.