

A Service for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, 3 May 2020

Rev'd Sophie Whitmarsh – Minor Canon

On Sunday mornings after Easter when the BBC1 Sunday Worship Service does not come from St Davids Cathedral (the next are on May 17 and June 7), the clergy team will take turns to produce a short service of reading, reflection and prayers, which will be posted on YouTube and social media. They will also produce a written summary of the service, which can be shared with those who don't have access to the internet. Here is the edited version by Rev'd Sophie Whitmarsh

The image of the Good Shepherd is an image we are all familiar with. But our reading today, which is only a small part of the wider Good Shepherd passage, is perhaps less familiar.

A sheepfold is an enclosed area where a shepherd might keep their sheep particularly overnight to protect them from foxes and other predators. It's also a great place to keep the sheep if you need to trim their feet or perhaps round them up to give them injections. But it's probably not so good at keeping out humans, who are particularly cunning and want to steal, disturb, upset, or kill the sheep. The fold will have only one entrance, and whoever enters the fold via any means other than through the gate are described as thieves, or robbers in the opening to the parable.

You may remember Jesus had just healed the man who had been blind from birth, and the Pharisees were having great difficulty trying to understand how anyone could do this, particularly on the Sabbath. In John chapter 9:30-34, the Pharisees are continuing their interrogation of this poor man, who finally says to them "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." Obviously horrified by this the Pharisees responded, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" and then they drove him out.

Jesus hears that the man he healed has been cast out of the community, and goes to speak with him, it is this conversation that leads to our parable. Jesus is criticising the Pharisees treatment of the blind man. By driving out the man from the synagogue, from the community and by seeking to discredit Jesus, they have potentially left the man abandoned and without anyone.

When I lived on the farm, the sheep tended to be my domain, I used to feed them and ensure their feet were okay, made sure they had all they needed to remain healthy, and spent hours during lambing season ensuring that all was well. The sheep would follow my voice (and the sound of the feed bucket) wherever I went. Now, having been away for 12 months or more, when I return to the farm to help out, it is no longer my voice they follow, now they follow my dad's voice, it is on him they rely for food, shelter and safety.

When I go in the field, to try and drive them out they merely scatter and run in a million different directions. Potentially leaving the sheep in vulnerable positions.

Sheep follow the call of their shepherd, and having never met Jesus before, the man who was born blind, recognised and “knew” his voice, confessing faith in Jesus. Sheep will scatter when robbers and thieves, or anyone they don’t know enters the fold. The Pharisees who considered themselves followers of Moses, failed to see Jesus’ significance, and instead drove away anyone who followed him, leaving them potentially vulnerable and without shelter. John’s Gospel is very black and white. You are either in, or you are out. There is no standing on the fence. You either choose the way of life through Jesus, or you don’t. Likewise, anything that doesn’t lead to life, leads to death, and therefore those who lead others away from following Jesus, inadvertently lead them to their death. In the previous chapter the Pharisees were very overtly trying to lead people away from Jesus, and in verse 10 of our passage today it says the thief comes only to steal, and kill and destroy.

There is a stark warning in this passage today to those who lead people away from Jesus, and I am not sure that the Pharisees realised what they were doing. How many times do we do things in our lives, that might lead people away from Jesus, most likely unintentionally? It is hard to know with any certainty what those things might be, what do we need to do to ensure we are reflecting Jesus rather than distracting from him or turning people away from him.

Rather confusingly, in the second part of our passage, Jesus begins to speak of himself as a door or gate to the fold, by which the sheep can come and go, a way to safety, a way to salvation within the fold, but equally a way to green pastures, a place of nourishment, where life is sustained.

As I have been reflecting on this passage, it occurred to me that as a community we may be feeling rather scattered, and vulnerable. Our fold may feel as though it has been broken into, as though corona virus has hopped over the fence and disorientated us all. Jesus, promises that he won’t let that happen, that he will always be the good shepherd. Whilst we may be more distanced than usual, Jesus remains faithful and the flock is most definitely in tact because Jesus is our shepherd. Let us be nourished and sustained by our common hope through this season, let Jesus be our safety, our refuge and our strength in this time of only physical, not spiritual distance. I want to finish with a passage from Isaiah 40:11

He will tend his flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.