**

Psalm 100
John 10.1-15**
**30th April 2023**

## Courageous and Compassionate Shepherds

**Introduction to the theme:**
I don’t know much about sheep! I’m too much of a townie. I do know that there are 11 million of them in Wales, compared with a human population of less than 3 million. So, I suppose if you are Welsh you might know a thing or two about sheep.

Today’s Gospel talks of Sheep and Shepherds. Indeed, the fourth Sunday after Easter is known in some churches as Good Shepherd Sunday.

The Art Historians tell us that if you did away with all the paintings that depict Jesus as The Good Shepherd, you’d only be left with half the art found in Christendom – it’s an image that has meant a great deal to the Church over the years.

In Jesus’ day there were more sheep farmers in Israel than cereal ones because the land was more appropriate to sheep than wheat. Yet sheep farming wasn’t easy and most of it was done on the 35-mile-long plateau that exists across the middle of Israel. This became the sort of sheep factory for the nation. And although we’re familiar with the idea of sheep being eaten at Passover or sacrificed in Jerusalem’s temple the truth is that sheep were predominantly kept for their wool not for their meat. Because of this a shepherd got to know his flock – and might even give some sheep a name. It was a pastoral relationship that grew and grew with each season.

Every country, depending on its terrain and traditions, does shepherding differently. So, whereas Collie dogs are a common sight in the British countryside there’s none in Israel. To guide and direct a sheep the shepherd would use his sling, catapulting a stone that fell just in front of its nose and in so doing warn it to turn around and come back. Perhaps that explains the Bible story of the shepherd boy David’s skill in bringing down Goliath the Philistine with a shot from his sling.

We often take all this imagery of Jesus and sheep and apply it to the pastoral life of The Church. Indeed, I even know of one congregation that calls its Pastoral Team: Shepherds.

Yet, from the time of the Pharaohs, ancient communities often thought of their national leaders as Shepherds. And that’s a thought that brings both challenge and comfort.

A leader has to have the courage of a shepherd, walking out in front and directing the flock, maybe with a sling and stone. Yet a leader also needs the compassion of a shepherd, caring for that one lost sheep that’s got away, or protecting the flock by sleeping, literally as a gate, to ensure their safety.

So, in our sermon we’ll reflect on this much-loved metaphor of Jesus the Good Shepherd and what it means to be part of his flock, or to be a leader out in God’s world.

**Sermon**
Minister: Gracious God, we open the bible
 and long to receive your word.
**All: Open, we pray, our minds and hearts
 to receive that word with all its comfort
 and in all its challenge. Amen.**

Whilst living and serving in Hitchin I was sometimes asked to spend a day at St Alban’s Abbey as the Duty Chaplain, that is a friendly face, available to give a welcome, offer up a prayer or just be a listening ear. Actually I love that definition of Chaplaincy that defines it as *holy hanging around –* and that’s rather what I did at St Alban’s from time to time.

Every time I did this I was intrigued by the school groups visiting the Abbey where they’d dress up as monks, one of them would be given extra robes because they had been chosen to be Bishop for the day. And one essential part of their outfit was a Bishop’s Crozier, which looks just like a Shepherd’s Staff. Of course, as every piece of clothing was put on, members of the Abbey’s Education Team explained its significance. And as they handed over the Crozier they told the youngsters it reminds bishops that they are like shepherds to their flock, called to be both courageous and compassionate.

I suspect, because as is often said, *history is written by the winners,* that maybe we usually just remember leaders who are, or were, supposedly courageous.

And yet the ancient world also infused the concept of leadership with compassion because of this shepherd metaphor.

A good leader, a wise king, a respected commander was one who thought inclusively and looked out for the weak, along with the strong.

David’s rule was celebrated by an ancient people because those shepherd like qualities he learnt in his youth seemed to stay with him and characterised his later life and reign.

A sceptre has traditionally been a ruler’s staff of office. Both Egyptian and Persian rulers are shown in ancient paintings carrying these symbols.

In 1953 a sceptre was placed into Queen Elizabeth’s hands by the Archbishop of Canterbury as he said these words, perhaps we’ll hear them again on Saturday: *Receive the rod of Equity and Mercy. Be so merciful that you be not too remiss; so, execute justice that you forget not mercy. Punish the wicked, protect and cherish the just, and lead your people in the way wherein they should go.”*
Leadership is never just about making a splash. It’s not enough to cultivate a non-smiling image of the strong guy with a bravado that means you’re prepared to do the unthinkable. Leadership is also about compassion. It sees the bigger picture by having a genuine care for the whole flock.

This style of leadership has fewer sound bites and is immensely challenging and complicated. Yet it’s the sort called for in the Bible. It reflects the character of God and the traditions of the Shepherds.

Now, today’s Gospel talks of the sheep knowing the voice of the shepherd.

Even a townie like me is aware, because I’ve seen *One Man and His Dog* on the telly, that British shepherds speak to their dogs. They command them to circle the flock by the left with the command *Come Bye,* or to the right with *Away to me.* However, I suspect, the sheep follow more out of fear of the dog than the voice of the shepherd.

But that’s not the same overseas.

The pioneering travel writer, H.V.Morteon visited Palestine in 1934 and wrote a book entitled ‘In the steps of the Master’ In it he tells of two shepherds sheltering from a storm, with their sheep, in a single cave. The flocks mingled together as they escaped the wind and rain. Once the storm had calmed one shepherd gave his particular call – half the sheep followed him out, leaving the remaining shepherd with only those sheep that belonged to his flock.

These sheep knew the voices of their shepherds.

I wonder how you listen out for God’s voice in your own life? Perhaps you are not even sure that you do! Isn’t that just something very spiritual people do, not me?

Well, I suspect God’s voice, God’s call can come in many very ordinary ways. Through conversation as we share our joys and sorrows. The memory of a good friend or relative whose example is still a guiding light for us. Or simply just going through stuff, the experience of life with all its new challenges and yet, deep within, we seem to be given the strength from somewhere to get through and maybe even flourish. And then, hopefully there might be scripture and the stories of the bible and the mystery of prayer, which blends space and time with an open heart.

Because actually it’s important, today’s passage urges us to follow the right shepherd. Obviously, there were some bad ones around, just as there are today.

We have to discern the voices that vie for our attention. It’s all too easy for us to be drawn in by vacuous celebrity or to make important decisions on no more than a feeling.

At a dinner time conversation in our house the subject of sermons came up. My heart sank! In particular, how long they should be?

Well, I was intrigued when a younger member of the family declared that his was the Tick Toc generation. So, as he left the table his parting shot was: *Dad, on Tick Toc if you can’t say it in under a minute we just move on to the next post.* A minute!!

Doesn’t real listening – either to a person or to God, and real engaging in a two way conversation, need longer than just a minute.

I wonder how seriously we do our listening?

Here's a short reflection on that theme that I came across the other day. It says:

*…and you know your sheep and you call them by name.*

*And if I were to be quiet enough;*

*if I were to silence all the words I want to say*

*and if I were to forget all the words I would put in your mouth,*

*I might just hear you calling my name as if it were the only name.*

*And then I would be glad to realise again*

*that the Lord is my Shepherd.*Challenge of the week? – let’s try listening out for the voice of God before we next gather here in church on Sunday.

Now, I want to bring this talk – and I know it was longer than a minute – to a close, by just making a passing comment about what the Shepherd wants for the sheep.

John says, he wants them *to go in and out and find pasture.* And when this happens, we *have found life, life in all its fulness.* Older Bible translations talk of Abundant Life.

Now once again, maybe it’s easy to over spiritualise this as if Abundant Life is essentially different from Everyday Life.

Is that right? I’m not sure John would agree.

That’s because when the Epistle of John was written he makes the point that Jesus was to be considered as both human and divine. That’s because some of those false Shepherds in John’s day stripped Jesus of his humanity. And that way of thinking about faith always promotes Abundant Life solely in terms of the next life. But John doesn’t do that in his Epistles, he celebrates the humanity of Jesus and the idea that this life can be a life in all its fullness. It’s not all *pie in the sky when we die.*This was a really big debate for the early church and John wanted his readers to do some good listening to the Good Shepherd on this topic, the shepherd who lets us go in and out and find pasture, in the here and now.

I loved what Erna wrote in Family News this month about finding God today in our everyday lives: She finished off her letter by saying (if I say it in front of you does it still count as plagiarism!):

*As we pray for resurrection in our own lives this Easter, in one sense we pray for something new and life-giving. But, in another we may be encouraged to know that all the building-blocks of that new life are already there inside us waiting to be re-awakened. And as they are re-awakened they have within them the power and the strength we need to face every day with its joys and burdens, its tasks and possibilities.*
Well, as Psalm 100 puts it: *We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*So, we thank God for the Good Shepherd, wise and merciful in leadership. A Shepherd whose voice we listen out for. A Shepherd who leads us into fulness of life, this and every day.

Thanks be to God for such a Shepherd. Amen

*Ian Green Amersham 28th April 2023*