

Sermon for Sunday 21 April 2024

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 4: 5 – 12; 1 John 3: 16 – end; John 10: 11 – 18

The Good Shepherd and His Sheep

For the last few weeks we've been thinking about some of Jesus' resurrection appearances. Today, in our Gospel reading, we have Jesus, the one who is present in our lives as the Good Shepherd. What does it mean for us? And how do we respond?

First, Jesus says, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." The Greek word 'kalos' translated here as 'good' has other meanings too, and could be translated as 'beautiful', 'honourable' or 'noble'. There was a Greek philosophical idea of the 'noble' death which was of a life given voluntarily and for the sake of others. Jesus stresses that he lays down his life of his own accord. He has power to lay it down and to take it up again, but he also acts in obedience to the Father. The Good Shepherd

lays down his life for the sheep because they belong to him, they are dear to him, his concern for their safety and welfare overrides all other considerations. For the shepherd to die for the sheep is not an action that makes logical sense. No actual owner of sheep would die for them. But perhaps its a way of helping us to see the extraordinary depth of God's love for us all in sending Jesus to die on the Cross for us.

Then, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." I have sometimes seen modern day sheep come out to follow someone – usually because they are hoping for some extra food. I've sometimes known them come across to a farm gate to take a look at me, hoping I might have something of interest for them. But these are not modern English sheep. As Paula Gooder writes. In the time of Jesus:

"Unlike in modern-day industrial size farms, the shepherd knew each sheep or goat, and the sheep or goats knew the shepherd. They would follow the shepherd's voice when called, but only

their own shepherd and not any other. I lived in the Holy Land for a while and will never forget the sight of four or five Bedouin shepherd boys, early in the morning, calling to their flock; nor how, when this happened, the large flock split into groups to gather in front of their own shepherd. Each shepherd knew which sheep would follow them – and each sheep knew which was their shepherd.”¹

So there is an intensity of relationship between the shepherd and his flock. And, remarkably, Jesus says more. “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. Jesus’ relationship with his sheep is as close as the relationship between Jesus and the Father. We know how close Jesus was, and is to His Heavenly Father. Well, he’s that close to us too. It’s just that perhaps, like the sheep, we may not always be aware of how closely we’re being guarded, cared for, watched over by the shepherd.

¹ From *The Parables*, Paula Gooder, p 56

One more slightly puzzling thing Jesus says here is this, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice”. (John 10: 16). There’s been debate about who Jesus meant, but it’s very likely that He meant us – the non-Jews, who are going to believe in Him in great numbers. What sets these people apart is that they will listen to His voice, unlike the Pharisees, who can’t accept Him. Jesus’ sheep are those who listen to His voice, and they all belong to the same flock under the one shepherd. Despite all the sad divisions between churches we all belong together. Jesus’ sheep belong to him and to one another.

We follow the good shepherd, who laid down His life for us. The good shepherd who knows each of us intimately. Better than we even know ourselves.

But we are not sheep. We’re human beings and we’re capable of so much more. Our readings from Acts and 1 John show us something of what it means to follow Him. In Acts Chapter 4, Peter and John are still dealing with the aftermath of

Peter's healing of a crippled beggar in the name of Jesus. They've now been arrested and brought before the same High Priest, Caiaphas, who examined Jesus. This time, Peter, the disciple who had denied Jesus, now preaches boldly, declaring Jesus to be the cornerstone who they have rejected, the only one who is able to give salvation.

We're not all called to be apostles, preachers, defenders of the faith like Peter. Our reading from 1 John gives us a different, much quieter challenge. He reminds us that we are all called to love – not just in word or speech, but in truth and action. In particular we are to help our brothers or sisters who are in need. (1 John 3: 18). We also ought to lay down our lives for one another – whatever that means for us in our time and place.

The Lord, the good shepherd, who died for us, calls us out to follow him into abundant life.

Let us pray -

Merciful Father,

you gave your Son Jesus Christ to be the good shepherd,
and in his love for us to lay down his life and rise again:

keep us always under his protection,
and give us grace to follow in his steps;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Revd Diana Young