

Sermon for Sunday 30 April 2023

Acts 2: 42 – end; 1 Peter 2: 19 – end; John 10: 1 – 10

The Sheep and the Shepherd

We had a break in the Peak District for a few days after Easter which gave us plenty of opportunity to observe sheep. There were lots of lambs to amuse us with their playing, their cute faces, wobbly legs and pink ears. There were also some remarkable sheep. We came across one on a lane we were walking on. When it saw us, it promptly jumped a four foot wall with a strand of barbed wire above, neatly getting itself back into the field. We suspected it wasn't the first time it had done this! On another walk we came across the shepherd riding a quad bike along a track with a container of feed. When they saw it the sheep came racing down the hillside and jumped a stream in order to get to the feed he was leaving for them. There are sheep, and then there are upland sheep!

Possibly the most famous and comforting verse in the Bible casts us as sheep and God as the shepherd - "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want". We're going to think some more about what that means with the help of today's readings.

Our Gospel reading today begins with a picture of a sheepfold. It seems most likely that Jesus had in mind a communal sheepfold possibly on the edge of a village where the sheep would be kept at night and looked after by a hired gatekeeper. The gatekeeper would guard the sheep and only let in the shepherds whose sheep were in the fold. The sheepfold is not a permanent place for the sheep. In the morning they go out to find pasture. Here's a description of what would happen once they got out of the sheepfold:

"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

As anyone would have known in Jesus’ time, the point of the story is that the shepherd knows his sheep, and they know him. Rather than being herded from behind, they follow the shepherd, but they won’t follow anyone else. The thieves and bandits Jesus refers to are probably the Pharisees who have been in conversation with Him Jesus up to this point. So Jesus is being extraordinarily rude to them. They’re not just bad shepherds, - far worse. They have no care for the sheep, but simply want to steal and exploit them.

So, what do we learn more positively from this? The focus is on the importance of the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. The depth of that relationship leads to recognition and trust. The sheep are not enforced or coerced, claimed or controlled. They simply follow their shepherd, because they trust him to lead them out to safe pasture, meeting their needs. Jesus is

¹ *The Parables*, Paula Gooder, p56

speaking about His own leadership, about the way He relates to His followers. The Pharisees can’t understand what He is getting at.

Because they don’t understand, Jesus tries a different image. This time He tells them He is the gate for the sheep. He is the way in and out of the sheepfold. Our reading from 1 Peter makes this more explicit:

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.” (1 Peter 2: 24 – 25).

By His death Jesus makes it possible for us to enter a new life as part of His flock. We are freed from our sins so that we can live a righteous life. Whereas the thieves and the bandits destroy, Jesus comes “that they may have life and have it abundantly”. (John 10:10).

The sheep aren’t stuck in the sheepfold doing nothing all day. (The only time we saw sheep in

a sheepfold in the Peak District they looked distinctly uneasy – as if they knew that the abattoir might be the next thing!) The sheep in Jesus’ fold go in and out to pasture living the abundant life. But what does that mean?

We know that by abundant life, Jesus didn’t mean ‘abundant possessions’. Luke records him saying this: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” (Luke 12: 15).

Our reading from Acts gives us one clue about abundant life. “All who believed were together and had all things in commonthey spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.” (Acts 2: 44 – 46).

There’s something here about community, about sharing with one another, as well as worship and eating together. Attempts to form Christian communities where everything is held in common have not always been successful. But abundant life certainly seems to be life together, worshipping and sharing together with other

Christians and caring for one another as best we can.

Our second reading, although in its context in the letter addressed specifically to slaves, suggests that suffering may also be part of abundant life. If Christ suffered, so also His followers can expect their share of persecution. The most important thing is how we respond to suffering when it comes. Jesus is our model, and He trusted absolutely in His heavenly Father.

To quote another Psalm – No 95 – “he is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of his hand.” (Psalm 95: 7)

Jesus is our shepherd, the one who knows, loves and cares for us and calls us into relationship with Him. As our shepherd, He leads us out to safe pasture, to a life of plenty, spaciousness and liberty. A life in Christ’s flock is not a half-lived life, cowering in a place of safety. It is a life of community, sharing and very possibly suffering. Our task is to follow along with the rest of the flock, to keep Him in sight and to trust Him at all

times, because the shepherd has the best interests of the flock at heart.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”.

Amen

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