

Easter 4 Good Shepherd Sunday

Thanks to Covid, we've been living through a very strange time over the past year or so, with some people needing to shield and not going out at all, and those going out being asked to wear face masks and keep to social distancing. We have been told to remember "hands, face, space" in order to keep our population safe, and this has created physical distance, and maybe even suspicion between people; but we have also been encouraged to become more community minded, to look out for neighbours and to think of those who might have needed extra help and support during this past difficult year.

During this time, as we know, the NHS has sought to treat our ills (not only Covid 19), and the front-line workers have put their lives at risk for us, many sacrificing their lives.

All this was the backdrop to my thinking, as I reflected on my message for Good Shepherd Sunday this year. Jesus the Good Shepherd, who is the one who gathers the flock and tends the sheep, looking after their needs and leading them to safety.

In contrast to the hired worker, the Good shepherd was prepared to lay down his own life for the protection of the sheep; and by doing so opened the gate of heaven to all who would seek to follow him.

We also know that it was at the moments of his greatest weakness that Jesus actually showed his greatest strength of love.

I'm very much aware of the struggles and challenges which this past year has brought to all of us, since we were last able to celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday back in 2019.

As well as the challenges of Covid and the three lockdowns, at the end of last year we began another vacancy. We have encountered many difficulties over this past year or so, but I wonder whether, by using the theme of Jesus the Good Shepherd, there might be way of seeing those things in a different light?

What I mean by this is that as part of my ministry as a hospital Chaplain I have frequently come across people who felt that life has dealt them some harsh blows, often which they felt they didn't deserve and had left them feeling weak and helpless.

By talking with them and praying through with them their account of what had happened to them, I have found that it is frequently possible to find a way of taking all that is giving them spiritual pain to God, so that the Easter promise of transformation, new beginnings and new possibilities becomes a reality for them.

The trouble is, what goes with opening up like this is the risk of self-exposure and vulnerability, with which many of us don't feel too comfortable. The

question is whether we are prepared to trust God with our deepest needs and hurts, and to allow him the elbow room he needs to turn our difficult experiences, like raw diamonds being expertly polished, into gems which can reflect his light and love?

Today's Gospel shows us a God whom Jesus describes in terms of a shepherd, whom the sheep know they can trust and who will use his power wisely and faithfully for those in his care.

What does that mean for us?

We can be like sheep in the way we tend to panic and scatter: the ways in which we can so easily be weighed down, crushed, even, by life's more difficult experiences.

But let's just recall for a moment some of the words of the hymn "Father hear the prayer we offer"... "Not for ever in green pastures do we ask our way to be; but the steep and rugged pathway may we tread rejoicingly".

This shows us that Jesus the Good Shepherd feeds us as we travel through the "rough grazing" of our challenging life experiences. He does not give us a soft religion, but one that opens up to us the difficulties of being his followers: the difficulties of loving others and serving their needs - and the risk of rejection which goes with that; of alleviating the needs of those worse off than ourselves; feeding the hungry; visiting the sick; consoling hurting people. All this is costly discipleship.

But, as well as this, he also feeds us with the smoother "grass", if you like, of affirmation and reassurance, which we receive when we need it through the love and care of others. "Be our strength in hours of weakness, in our wanderings be our guide; through endeavour, failure, danger, Father be Thou at our side".

Finally, as we know from the words of Ps 23 he "makes us lie down in green pastures". Our Lord knows when we need the quiet of rest and contemplation, where our souls are refreshed and mended by the stream of divine power and energy; and we can access all this every time we receive him in Holy Communion.

If we can believe and trust that through all the twists and turns, ups and downs of life's journey, Jesus the Good Shepherd is with us, then perhaps we can begin to treat life's unkindnesses towards us with more grace, or even reverence, in the hope and expectation that God will bring something new out of them. What could then be taking place would be a huge strengthening, both of the whole body of Christ, and as each one of us as members of it.

Safe in the keeping of the Jesus the Good Shepherd, we are set free to live out our lives, both as individuals and as a community, more truly ourselves than ever before.