

Sermon for Easter 4, Sunday 3 May 2020

John 10 v. 1-10

There is a wonderful prophecy in Ezekiel about God the Shepherd. God himself appears in the role of the faithful Shepherd taking over the duties neglected by the faithless shepherds. "I myself will tend my flock, I myself will pen them in their fold" says the Lord God. "I will search for the lost, recover the stragglers, bandage the hurt, strengthen the sick, leave the healthy and strong to play, and give them their proper food." What wonderful, all-embracing care to us, as God plans to shepherd the flock himself. In John's Gospel, Jesus is the true fulfilment of this prophecy. He is the Shepherd in charge of the sheep. He speaks of the fold, the shepherd and the door by which the sheep may pass in and out and find pasture in safety. He knows us by name and knows each of us individually.

At that time in Palestine in the villages and towns there were communal sheepfolds where all the villages' flocks were sheltered when they returned at night. The shepherd would stand at the entrance and call his own sheep by name who would recognise his voice and come to him. "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me" says Jesus. It is the personal bond between us and the shepherd that keeps us together when with the virus everything seems to be pulling us apart. And so, Jesus knows me and personally calls me by name in such intimacy.

There was an opening in the sheepfold by which the sheep came in and went out. At night the shepherd himself lay down, across the opening and no sheep could get out over his body. God himself keeps us safe. He is the true shepherd and exercises his authority for the good of the sheep. Maybe the simple pastoral presentations of Jesus as the Good Shepherd have lost their punch in today's world? But perhaps not; a few years ago I went to a meeting called to support a young black teacher who had been attacked. She was beaten unconscious in the grounds of her junior school by a gang of racist thugs. As she talked she recalled a poem that had helped her on the road to recovery "As a shepherd guards his sheep let the little children sleep"

She remembered her responsibility for the safety of her children. So even in that unlikely setting the image of the shepherd caring for his sheep still had its healing power. Finally, John states that the real issue between the true and false shepherds is a matter of life and death. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The false shepherd is a thief and a robber who steals the kingdom. On the contrary, the true shepherd governs his people rightly and brings them into a proper acceptance of God. Thus he insures they have true life, a life more abundant than they can find anywhere else. "I have come that they may have life and may have it in all its fullness". What an amazing promise!

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