

Sunday 22 April 2018 (Fourth Sunday of Easter)

St Andrew's Church, Cobham

Acts 4.5-12; 1 John 3.16-end; John 10.11-18.

Sheep and Shepherd

In John's gospel, we find what are called the 'I am' sayings of Jesus. There are seven of them, and they are all aimed at helping Jesus's hearers to understand just who he was.

Who can remember them off the top of their heads? Here they are:

- I am the bread of life – John 6.35
- I am the light of the world – John 8.12
- I am the gate – John 10.9
- I am the resurrection and the life – John 11.25
- I am the way, the truth and the life – John 14.6
- I am the true vine – John 15.1
- And of course, the one which we heard in our gospel reading this morning:
I am the good shepherd - John 10.11.

Of the seven 'I am' images, I think that when it comes to understanding and deepening our life as followers of Christ, the image of Christ as shepherd is especially helpful. This is because it is an image of a *relationship* – shepherd and sheep.

This morning I would like to ask: what does this image of sheep and shepherd teach us about our lives as disciples?

Let's have a look.

Firstly, how do you feel about being likened to a sheep? The answer to that question can be surprisingly telling.

In my youth, I spent some time working on a sheep farm in West Sussex and I soon came to realize why the sheep has become an image for stupidity. They really are very dim creatures, bless them, easily manipulated, easily frightened, easily scattered and lost.

So being likened to sheep is not a compliment!

But it is accurate.

We may not like to think so, but when it comes to the life of the spirit we are very much like sheep, and if you find yourself resisting that image, it may be time to dwell a little on the sin of pride!

For a start, just like sheep, we are very easily *confused*. We can be swayed this way and that by the things we read or hear, absorbing opinions without really analysing them, and then, congratulating ourselves on the triumphs of human reason and intellect, we head off down a wrong road into the wilderness.

We are also very *fearful*, just like sheep. Our fear and worry and anxiety about the things of this world drive us into making bad decisions about life, running in the opposite direction from where we should be going, trying to find security and freedom in things like money and comfort.

And, just like sheep, we are very *vulnerable* to predators – in our case, spiritual predators, things that will devour us if they gain a hold, things such as sexual immorality, addiction, self-pity, resentment and greed – any of the vices.

I know being likened to sheep is not very flattering but when it comes to our spiritual state, I fear that that is very much what we are, and Jesus was absolutely right to use that analogy.

Given the nature of sheep, they truly do need a shepherd if they are to be safe, peaceful and productive.

Which brings us to the shepherd.

When Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd, he tells us some critically important things about life as his followers.

The first is that he *knows* his sheep (Jn 10.14) and even calls them by name (Jn 10.3). Isn't that wonderful? Out of all the billions of people who have ever existed, and who ever will exist, Jesus *knows* us. If you count yourself as a follower of Jesus it is because he called you – personally, by name.

The second thing – and it is just as wonderful – is that you know *him*.

On the sheep farm where I worked, every evening the farmer would shoulder a bag of food and walk down to a trough at the bottom of the paddock and he would call the sheep with a distinctive call. All the sheep recognized this call and from wherever they were in the field they would come running towards him.

Jesus said that his sheep listen for his voice and he calls them by name, and they follow him because they know his voice (Jn 10.1-4).

If you are a follower of Jesus, or even wish to be a follower, or you are thinking about being a follower, it means that something in you recognizes his voice. You have heard him calling you by name and you recognize the voice of your shepherd.

This intimate knowledge that exists between sheep and shepherd, between Jesus and us, this listening for the voice of our shepherd, is at the heart of being a disciple.

There may be a multitude of voices calling and shouting, but Jesus knows us and is calling directly to us by name. At the same time, *we* know *him* and will recognize his voice, and once we hear his voice, we will be able to follow him through all the noise and chaos, in the right direction.

You will know his voice when you hear it. It may be very quiet and gentle, or it may be strong and stern. But you will know it when you hear it.

And once we learn to recognize it, and follow it, we will be fed and cared for and protected for ever, and will never be led astray or abandoned or left to be devoured.

And how do we know this?

It is because our shepherd is different from all other shepherds.

Our shepherd, the one whose voice we follow, is the one who loves us so much that he is willing to lay down his life for us.

Amen.