

Sunday Morning Resources

Sunday 25 April 2021 - Fourth Sunday of Easter

Lectionary Readings (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you **must** use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

Acts 4.5-12; Psalm 23; I John 3.16-end; **John 10.11-18**

Homily

Today's homily has been written by Susan Rawlings, LLM in the Madingley Benifice

Aim: The new life of the Resurrection

Text: "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (John 10:11)

The Bible is so rich in images which find a permanent place in our hearts and minds that it is difficult to have a favourite. But the picture of God as a shepherd who loves and cares for his sheep, is perhaps among our favourites. It is a comforting picture, not difficult to understand, even in our present times, so different in many ways from the world of more than 2000 years ago. Maybe we can see the shepherd in our mind's eye, wrapped up against the sun and rain, staff in hand, focused on his flock, looking out for better grazing, or watching for possible danger. And no doubt we are familiar with images of the shepherd carrying home a weary sheep on his shoulders, as if it were no burden at all, or pulling it to safety from a rocky precipice.

Perhaps the most memorable words of today's reading from St John's Gospel about the Good Shepherd are those of Jesus when he says "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." (10:11). But shepherds, even ones good at their job, don't usually go that far. After all, a human life is surely more important than that of a sheep. What does Jesus mean? He has moved on in thought from an example of farming practice to what it means to lead and to follow.

It may have been because of the Pharisees, the spiritual and religious leaders, shepherds we might say, of their people, that Jesus used the image of shepherd and sheep to speak about the work he had come to do. In the previous chapter (chapter 9) St John gives us the account

of the man who had been blind from birth. Jesus had healed him on the sabbath, which had angered the Pharisees. The man, whose name we do not know, was brought before the Pharisees. There was a fairly rough exchange between the man and the Pharisees which resulted in him being excluded from the synagogue and so made an outcast from society. There was no rejoicing in the faith that brought healing, in the relief of someone's distress, in a sheep brought safely home. It was the responsibility of the Pharisees to guide and look after the people and to be on the watch for the coming of the Messiah, the Saviour. But they used their authority to bolster their own position and not to help the blind man. Instead they threw him out, rejected him. Jesus is saying that this is not God's way. God's power protects and saves. And that is how our social structures should work too.

Then Jesus goes on to tell us more of the work of the shepherd. Several different flocks are gathered into the sheepfold for protection during the night. In the morning the shepherd comes to take his own flock out to pasture. The sheep are listening and recognise the voice of their own shepherd. As each shepherd calls to his own sheep they respond only to him. The idea that we are known to God by name as individuals is found elsewhere in the Bible and surely adds to our sense of comfort and trust in his presence. In the Book of Isaiah God says to Jacob "Have no fear, for I have redeemed you. I call you by name and you are mine" (Isaiah 43:1). In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says "But if anyone loves God, he is known by God" (1 Cor.8:3). It is a thought almost too great to grasp that God knows each one of us, each person he has created, just as we are. And just as we are, we are loved by God. But, like the sheep in John's Gospel, we need to hear our shepherd's voice and respond by following him where he leads us. It is Jesus who can give us safe passage through our lives and at the end bring us safely home to his Father's presence. He uses his power and authority to save, and not destroy, so that "We may have life and may have it in all its fullness" (10:10). This prepares us for his next words when he says "the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (10:11).

And so the meaning of the Cross of Jesus stands clear before us. Jesus went beyond what an ordinary shepherd would do. Of his own free will he sacrificed his life to save all people, including you and me. He taught us that we are all one flock in him, equally loved by him and equally bound to love one another. And in his resurrection to new life Jesus makes it possible for all to share the new life he brought by dying on the Cross. But this comes at a cost, which

St Mark sets out when he says: “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10: 42-45).

Suggested intercessions

The response when I say “Lord, hear us” is “**Lord graciously hear us**”

As followers of the Good Shepherd, let us bring to him the needs of all our brothers and sisters. Let us pray together.

We pray for the Church, that in its various ministries it may never lead anyone astray, but always follow faithfully the way of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.

Lord, hear us ...

We pray for the world, that in working to do God’s will we may not abuse or waste our talents in mindless destruction, but rather work with our Creator God to help and heal, protect and fulfil.

Lord, hear us ...

We pray for all those who are ill, and those who look after them; that even in pain and distress they may recognise Jesus, who also suffered, and who is full of caring and compassion.

Lord, hear us ...

We pray for all of us gathered together, and the families we represent; that in following Jesus, the Good Shepherd, we may be set free to live selfless, generous lives.

Lord, hear us ...

In a moment of silence let us share with our Father God our own cares and concerns.

Lord, hear us ...

Father, hear our prayer; in joy may we follow the way of Christ, who alone has the words of eternal life, through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord.

AMEN

Suggested hymns/songs

- Christ is made the sure foundation
- O thou who at thy Eucharist didst pray
- Give me joy in my heart
- Praise to the Lord, the Almighty
- The Lord's my Shepherd
- The King of Love my Shepherd is
- Ye servants of God
- Bright the vision that delighted
- My song is love unknown
- We have a gospel to proclaim