

Good Shepherding

John 10: 11-18

A few weeks ago, whilst out of a walk, Martyn and I happen to notice a sheep in a field down Smithy Fen that had gotten itself wedged on its back, and was lying there helpless, with all four limbs in the air. We wondered for a moment if it had expired but the occasional flicker of its tail told us that it was still very much alive. We knocked on the door of the house nearest to the field and was told where the farmer who owned the field lived. We tracked on further up Smithy Fen to find the right farm and were greeted by a modern day shepherdess who, on hearing the story, knew which sheep this was likely to be, and immediately set about jumping in her land rover, with her small son in tow, to roll the sheep back onto its feet. She was immediately present when the sheep needed her to be, she knew this sheep personally, and was able to support it back onto its feet so it could join the rest of the flock and do whatever sheep do. What a good shepherd!

In our Gospel passage today, Jesus reveals that *he* is the 'Good Shepherd'. Although the word 'good' is used in most translations, it doesn't quite capture the nuances of the original. In Greek, the word is '*kalos*', which can be translated as 'noble, 'beautiful', 'perfect', 'precious' or even 'wonderful'. What a difference it makes if every time we read or hear the familiar phrase 'Good Shepherd', we translate it as '*wonderful shepherd*' instead.

Jesus, and those listening to him, were well aware of the importance of shepherds in their rural setting, and what shepherding meant in the history of the Israelites. The Lord was the Shepherd who had led the Israelites to freedom through the Red Sea, nourished them in the desert, and guided and led them for forty years through the desert to the Promised Land. And he gave them a way of life in the Ten Commandments that they needed to live in order to reach fulfilment. The Lord had given them shepherds throughout their history to lead them: Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, and many others.

Isaiah reveals that the Lord

*'will feed the flock like a shepherd;
He will gather the lambs in his arms*

*and carry them on his bosom
and gently lead those that are with young.* (Is 40: 11)

The reference to the young is a useful one as we all recognise, having been a child, that children know that they need their parents to feed them, care for them, love them, look after them, protect them, guide them and help them grow up. Those who are not totally self-sufficient need kind, compassionate and competent people, as well as good teachers, to help them develop. Young adults need role models who will help them grow up and make good choices. All of us who want to deepen spiritually and grow in a life of love and prayer need a spiritual father or mother who will help us on this road. Many people who feel lonely and a bit lost in our rather rich, materialistic society are looking for people who will guide them in a good and healthy life and help them to find meaning to their lives. Aren't we all looking for people who really care for us, understand us and respect us?

In our passage today, we are clearly the sheep that Jesus is referring to, the ones that he knows, and for whom he will lay down his life. And, as my mind wanders back to the image of that sheep on its back down Smithy Fen, with its legs in the air, unable to right itself, I do wonder if we are sometimes like that sheep. Whilst those who make up the church family of All Saints', Cottenham with Rampton are all different – some of us are married, some single, some widowed, others divorced; we've old, middle-aged and young among us; gay and straight; those who have children, others who don't – there is one thing we *all* have in common, and that is the ability to make mistakes. I'd like to bet good money that no-one here today or listening at home will *not* have made a mistake, or a wrong decision in life that has led us to fall metaphorically on our backs with our legs in the air, unable to right ourselves! And we need people who can come alongside us, give us sound advice, roll us over and get us back on our feet.

But, just as we need this for ourselves at times, we can also be this person – the shepherd if you will - for others. In the same way that I'm sure each of us can think of someone in our lives who has guided and supported us over the years, or helped us through a particularly difficult time, we can pay that forward and be a guide and support to someone else. If you're an older church family member, you'll have much to offer in wisdom and experience to younger members - to those raising young children, to our young people finding their way in the world, and to those of any age who might be in need.

But Jesus is not just the Good Shepherd – the wonderful shepherd – to those who know him, he is the Good Shepherd of all. Consider these words from verse 16:

'I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.'

If there was ever a verse in the Bible that was a call to oneness, that addresses and welcomes diversity, then this is it. But how so very wrong we get this. Few who watched the Panorama report on Monday night will not have been moved by the personal stories of those who have been affected by racism in the Church of England. Archbishop Justin Welby said in February last year at General Synod that the Church was *'still institutionally racist'*, and this week, following the Panorama programme, he added that he was *'horrified'* to hear the extent of racist abuse within the church. How a picture of a banana, superimposed with the head of a young black man with the words *'Bananaman'* printed underneath it, *wasn't* regarded as racism beggars belief. It's a deeply offensive and deeply racist image, and failure to see this suggests that the church has a long way to go to stamp out racism in its midst. I'm pleased that Justin Welby is horrified, just as we all should be, but we know that it will be actions that will ultimately speak, not words. Change has to come, but not just within the church but in society as a whole.

Many living in the United States who saw Derek Chauvin convicted of murder this week following the death of George Floyd last year are clamouring for change. Whilst the exceptionally rare conviction marked a turning point in history, or as President Biden described *'a giant step forward in the march toward justice in America'*, he was sensible to warn that *'we can't stop here.'* The Vice-President urged lawmakers to pass the George Floyd bill aimed at reforming policing in the US, just as in the UK we await the implementation of recommendations contained within the report from the Archbishops' Anti-Racism Taskforce published this week, designed to make the Church of England fairer and more diverse, and to become representative of the people of England. If progress is going to be made, it cannot be just another report destined to gather dust on a bookshelf somewhere with the pretence that its mere publication has addressed the issue. It hasn't.

But let's not make the mistake in thinking that it's only in organisations where there is a problem. Few of us will openly admit to holding racist beliefs but many psychologists claim that most of us are nonetheless unintentionally

racist. I imagine many of us will be thinking *'No, that's not me!'* when we hear that, but what they're talking about is *unconscious bias*, where we unconsciously favour people who look like us, and regard people who don't look like us as 'other'. The danger is that when you see people as 'other', this can lead to discrimination as well as racial bias in all areas of life, from employment, police investigations, the outcome of court cases, and so on.

Overcoming biases is an uphill struggle, as they can be so deeply ingrained in our consciousness, but we need to be having these conversations and to be prepared to be comfortable with being uncomfortable before real progress can be made. There's no silver bullet on how to solve racism, but a starting point has surely to be prepared to learn more about racism – as individuals and as a church. But I'd go as far as saying *not* just racism, for we know that unconscious bias relates to many other areas too, not least sexuality, but also how we see anyone who is 'different' from us.

In a week where disunity in the church and in society has hit the news, it's good to be reminded in our gospel passage that Jesus yearns for unity between all people. He came to break down the barriers that separate people and to bring them together. And that unity stems from the unity he has with God, for the Son and the Father are one. Overcoming racism and being truly one can feel an overwhelming task, but I'd like to end with the words of an inspirational young black woman who you will recall spoke at a rather big event earlier this year – Amanda Gorman:

*There is always light
if only we are brave enough to see it,
if only we are brave enough to be it.*

If we're to be that light, what do *you*, what do *I*, what do *we*, as a church, need to do to play our part in combating racism and achieving the unity that Christ died for?

Amen.