

May the words that I speak, and the thoughts of our hearts, be pleasing to you, lord God, our redeemer. Amen.

Good morning. It's lovely to be here. I'm bringing the greetings from St. John's parish church in Menston to you as well. They are aware that I'm here and in fact I've received a few messages, saying that because I'm preaching here, they're praying for you.

I'm not quite sure how to take it, but it is lovely to see you all!

I am the good shepherd. it's one of the most well-known sayings, that Jesus came out with. we often think of it in nice romantic terms. But this saying was actually on the back of a controversy, where Jesus healed a man that was born blind, and it produces such division among its hearers, that some even claim that Jesus had a demon within him.

It clearly means more to its hearers than just a pretty hillside scene.

Really briefly, this controversy is because Jesus contrasts himself as a good shepherd with various Old Testament images of bad shepherds, where Israel's religious leaders were accused by God of using their position to profit at the expense of the people. Shepherds were getting fat, feasting on the lambs; shepherds ran away without protecting the sheep; shepherds were warm and comfortable in woollen clothing while their sheep strayed into danger.

For Jesus, with the latest controversy over the miraculous healing of a man born blind, the contrast is between himself, as good shepherd, and with those around him who were more concerned for ritual observance than human flourishing.

In our reading Jesus claims that he is the good shepherd twice. The first time, he claims it in contrast to the hired sheep herders. Jesus is prepared to lay down his life in defence of the sheep: he cares for them, unlike the herders.

He wants their well-being, even if it involves risk to himself. This is the picture we have of Jesus at Easter: a Jesus who died for us, who gave himself over to the wolves to win our protection and freedom. This is the Jesus who risked religious controversy, in order to give the sight to a man whom everyone else had written off as blind, sinful, and therefore cursed.

The second time that Jesus claims to be the good shepherd, it is to claim that his sheep know him, and he knows his sheep. The damning implication is that the religious leaders that he's talking to, don't know, and don't care, for their sheep, and their sheep are scattering, unable to hear the voice of God through them.

The sheep hear the shepherd's voice, and follow it; knowing who it is and trusting that the shepherd knows best. The flip side is that Jesus knows his sheep - who they are and what they need.

On Vocation Sunday we might all, therefore, reflect on Jesus as our own good shepherd, who laid down his life for each of us. Each of us; every one of us; and Jesus who knows us, and who calls us by his voice, to follow him.

So, if any of us today have not yet responded to this call to follow Jesus, then this is indeed your lucky day. Jesus calls us always to follow him.

But we may also reflect, however, that much of the context of the reading is about those entrusted with the care of God's flock. For those of us in ordained work, or leadership, or training for ordination (just finishing placement here) it's a really sobering thought: to be good shepherds means willingly to put the needs of the flock ahead of our own: in the mould of Jesus, rather than the mould of the hired hands, and that's a constant challenge to us all.

But the contrast with the hired hands isn't just for clergy and leaders. We are all called by God, and all have a vocation in God's world. If we take seriously our status as God's servants, then all that we do is to God's glory, every moment of every day. And therefore we aren't just hired hands. In whatever we are called to, because of God's calling, we're not committed to our own well-being, but instead we are committed to the sheep: the flourishing of those in our care: at school, at home, in the office, on the other end of a phone, or Zoom; to the finances of those that we control if we're in the bank; to our customers; our clients; our patients; and so on.

As we seek to follow God's calling in our lives, whatever that is, we do it as service to God, and not as hired hands.

And then, on Vocation Sunday, we might reflect on God knowing us, and us hearing God's voice, and following.

Perhaps God *is* calling you this morning.

Do you recognise his voice, and will you follow it?

That might be a call to ordination, or it might be a call to nursing. It might be a call to volunteer work, or it might be a call to investment banking. It might be medicine, education, politics, retirement, lay ministry; any of these things and more. If you feel that God might be calling you please talk to one of the clergy here about it.

In the reading this morning, Jesus is the good shepherd. His calling is for the benefit of the sheep, and of the flock as a whole.

Calling can be really scary, but we trust that God knows best and he cares about our safety, and our flourishing.

It struck me this morning that shepherds don't call their sheep once, they keep calling. And it may therefore be that you've felt like you've been called for quite a while and have been ignoring it; a bit like my dog does when I call her back in from the garden quite a lot.

It might be that there's lots of times a transition in life – retirement, finishing a placement, I could go on - God still calls, and God keeps calling.

And so, you never get to the point in your life where God is no longer calling you, in the same way as a sheep never gets to the point where it can just sit and eat grass and ignore the shepherd.

Jesus, our good shepherd, cares for us - his sheep. He lays down his life for us and he knows us; he is a trustworthy shepherd. A caller who knows us, and who is known by us. He will never leave us, or run from us like a hired hand, and neither should we run from our vocation whatever that might be.

Our shepherd calls and we follow.

So, may we fearlessly trust our shepherd, in all that we're called to, whatever that is, and maybe work as those who are willing to lay down our lives, in imitation of Christ and by the help of the Holy Spirit, in whatever vocation we find ourselves, and however we serve.

May God speak to each of us this morning, and may we have the courage to listen and respond. Amen.