

St Ann's, Rainhill – 22.4.18 (Sunday 10.30am Communion)

Easter 4

John 10.11-18

The Good Shepherd

Well, we are deep in sheep territory this morning. And that's quite appropriate, because it's lambing season. Now, we don't have much in the way of sheep farming round Rainhill – we do have excellent potatoes, but not really sheep. The Gospel reading we have just heard is one of a series of shepherd images used in rapid succession by Jesus in John chapter 10, and they continue after today's reading. At the beginning of the Chapter, Jesus is continuing a conversation with the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders based at the Temple in Jerusalem, a conversation which he began in chapter 9 after Jesus gave sight to a man born blind – he didn't heal him, he didn't restore to him something lost, he gave him something he had never had before, and that is a very important image of Jesus in itself. Jesus is definitely something the world has never seen before.

The Pharisees had tried to make the man born blind reject his restoration as being from God – and in so doing, to reject Jesus as being from God – but he wouldn't, so they threw him out of the Temple. Jesus heard what had happened, sought out the man, and started the dialogue with the Pharisees, who were a bit put out that Jesus was implying that they were spiritually blind, because they couldn't see that the man born blind was given sight by God's power, because to admit that would be to admit that Jesus was acting with divine authority, and they were not going to admit that.

Jesus then talks about being the gate for the sheep – the only true way for people to enter into safety, to be members of the flock who recognise the voice of Jesus. This is all about salvation, about being safe from eternal death. Others who do not come in through the gate are not to be trusted. There is an interesting parallel with Psalm 23 here, which is of course also an image of God as shepherd. The Lord's rod and staff comfort us. Why?

Slide – rod & staff & sheep pen

Well, these were the tools of the shepherd – for guiding the sheep and for fighting off those who would harm them. And, of course, the shepherd would sleep across the open entrance to the sheep pen, he would literally be the gate. The shepherd was also a bit of an outcast, living at the margins of society, a bit rough and looked down on by the nice folk. Necessary, but not to be invited to marry your daughter. So rather than our slightly fluffy image of the Good Shepherd – like the one on the stained glass in the side chapel – being a shepherd was dangerous, edgy, uncomfortable and a sure way to miss out on all the best parties.

Yet this is the image Jesus chooses – we are sheep, he is the shepherd. His own flock know him, and he is prepared to sacrifice all for that flock, for us. In contrast, the hired hands, who do not have the best interests of the flock at heart because they do not own the sheep, will run away rather than sacrifice themselves – which may be a reference to the events of AD70, (John's Gospel was written in about AD90), when the Temple was destroyed

following an unsuccessful rebellion, and the Pharisees abandoned the ordinary people to their fate and fled to Jamnia on the Mediterranean coast, to reconstruct Judaism well away from Jerusalem.

And there seems little doubt that this passage is included by John as a direct attack on those who have led the flock astray – or at least have failed to lead the flock to safety.

The location is Jerusalem, and the timing seems to be Hannukah – the midwinter Festival of Dedication, which recalled the restoration of the Temple 200 years previously following the revolt of Judas Maccbeus (after the Greek Antiochus IV had looted it). At that festival, the leaders reflected on Ezekiel 34, which says among others things,

Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but

with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵ So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶ My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

And later, God says,

I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹² As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

The Good Shepherd will come and do the work that the bad shepherds have not been doing. So this becomes a less fluffy image. Jesus is actually condemning the leadership of the Temple, using the self-same imagery with which they had patted themselves on the back two hundred years previously.

The Temple was supposed to be the sheepfold in which God's flock were kept safe, but this had not happened. I have no doubt at all, and I've said this here before, that the Pharisees were acting from what they considered to be all the right motives. They were trying to protect and preserve their way of life and worship under the occupation of a series of foreign powers, which had been the case for Jerusalem for hundreds of years. They had compromised, out of political and economic expedience, many times over the centuries, in return for permission to carry on with the whole cycle of sacrifices and festivals. And it worked – the Temple was there, and the Roman approved King, Herod, had massively extended and refurbished the site.

But they had lost sight of the purpose of it all. The Temple and its traditions was not the point. The priesthood and the leadership were not there to maintain the dignity and continuity of the Temple. They were supposed to be shepherds of God's sheep – *pastor* in Latin, and *pascere* which is to lead to pasture, from where we get the word paschal. To lead, to tend, to look after. Then and now

leadership of God's people is not about religious observation, but about keeping the flock safe.

And that role is not a cosy, comfortable one. For all that the Christian church has enjoyed, and sadly abused, a position of authority over the centuries. Shepherding the sheep is not about power and preference. It is about sacrifice and love.

And it is not the job of the vicar. We are all called to be shepherds, pastors. All of us who seek to follow Jesus, seek to be like him. Every one of us. As the shepherd goes and finds his flock among the scattered sheep. We all have that role to perform.

And it is costly. We are not shepherding God's flock to be thanked or praised, or to have an automatic seat at the top table. We are doing it because it is right, and out of love for our fellow human beings. And we cannot compromise that, although we all do. We cannot be both shepherds of God's sheep and promoters of our own interests.

Following Jesus – truly doing what God has planned for us – this requires us to give up our place at the centre of our own interests. To put others first. Literally to prefer the needs of others over our own needs. To risk everything we have in the service of the God who sacrificed her son that we might live.

This is not a cuddly story, warmly reassuring us that we are loved. This is a challenge, and a stern one. A reminder that we have a responsibility, and that there are severe consequences – for us and for others – if we fail to take that responsibility seriously. Our role as disciples of the risen Jesus is to be as the risen Jesus – to be Good Shepherds. To lead and care for others, putting our lives, possessions, preferences in danger that they might be saved.

Why? Because Jesus did, and the Church is the body of Christ.

Nobody ever said following the Lord was easy. But you will not find anything which is more important, fulfilling or rewarding.

Amen.