

Rev Tim Perkins
April 21st 2021

"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." John 10: 16

Dear Friends,

The quotation above is taken from the Gospel passage in the lectionary for this coming Sunday. It is from the well-known passage where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep but I want to reflect on it from a slightly different, perhaps unusual perspective today. When these words were written they were done so in order to remind the early followers of Jesus that he had died and risen so that all people, Gentiles as well as Jews, might be incorporated into the Kingdom of God. God's Kingdom then extends beyond whatever boundaries human nature seeks to put in place to restrict entry and keep the club exclusive.

Exclusivity and boundaries or borders which are erected to ensure that some are protected inside and others are kept outside is an issue that is sadly still all too prevalent in society today – the latest example of which is surely the proposal for a European Super League in football but it has always been part of the fallen nature of humanity that enables the rich, powerful and influential to maintain their position at the expense of the less fortunate. It is why minority groups have often been treated harshly. And the Christian Church sadly has never been immune to the falleness which builds division and exploitation. Even just this week we have heard more news reports of discrimination within the Church and people having been marginalised then being paid off and forced to sign NDA's – buying off their silence! We have so much further to go, so much more to do to bring to fruition Jesus' vision of one flock.

And it is easy for us today who are inside churches to continue these underlying, often unconscious attitudes and bias so that we protect our ways of thinking and worshipping. How often do we stop to really listen to the voice of our Shepherd telling us that there are other sheep to bring into the fold? How often do we actually consider that the task of sharing our faith and expressing the love of God for all – not just those on the inside – in both word and action, is our primary calling as followers of Jesus? How often do we forget his commission to go into all the world and make disciples of all people? Too often we are more concerned with maintaining our buildings, maintaining our fellowship groups, maintaining our traditional styles of worship and our religious practices. Don't get me wrong – such things are an important and even sometimes vital aspect of expressing and deepening our faith but we must not allow them to get in the way of sharing God's love with others.

That brings me to a very practical issue. Many of our churches in the Circuit are now returning to services in our Church buildings and yet as I sit at my computer trying to fill the Circuit preaching plan for June to August, I find that there are 20% more appointments to fill than there are preachers available! There are some short-term reasons why this is the case but there are other, longer-term issues under-pinning it. Our list of active preachers is shrinking as due to age or infirmity some have had to take the decision to cease leading worship. However, they are not being replaced by new people coming forward to explore a call to preach or to become a worship leader. We currently only have one preacher in training and no Local Preachers' Tutor!

What is God saying to us through all of this? We will have to find creative, short-term ways of solving short-term issues which will mean that the June to Aug plan might look very different to ones we have had in the past. But maybe there are questions we need to face about just who we are as Christian communities and what exactly God might be calling us to. We have learned much

across the circuit about how to engage in worship when our church buildings have been closed, some of which has actually helped us to engage with new people in sharing faith and worshipping God. I hope we do not forget all that! But the main challenge I want to ask you to reflect on and share with others in your church is this: "How is your church going to work in ways moving forward which mean that you are actively engaging with people in your communities, outside of the church, sharing with them the love of God, something of your own story of faith, and helping them to respond in ways which draw them into worship of God?"

The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission. We seek to do this through worship, learning, caring, service and evangelism. What will each of these aspects of our faith look like if we take seriously Jesus' call for us to work to break down barriers and bring people into his one flock?

Every blessing,

Rev Tim