



Fourth Sunday of Easter

The Cost of Care

A service by Zoom on Sunday 25th April 2021

Welcome

In our service today, as we continue to celebrate the season of Easter, we have a theme of sheep and shepherds as we consider the Cost of Care.

Hymn – The King of love my shepherd is (Singing the Faith 479)

Our opening hymn is based on Psalm 23 and recalls the faithfulness of God our Good Shepherd.

1. The King of love my Shepherd is,
whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am his
and he is mine for ever.

2. Where streams of living water flow
my ransomed soul he leadeth,
and where the verdant pastures grow
with food celestial feedeth.

3. Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
but yet in love he sought me,
and on his shoulder gently laid,
and home, rejoicing, brought me.

4. In death's dark vale I fear no ill
with thee, dear Lord, beside me;
thy rod and staff my comfort still,
thy cross before to guide me.

5. Thou spread'st a table in my sight;
thy unction grace bestoweth:
and O what transport of delight
from thy pure chalice floweth!

6. And so through all the length of days
thy goodness faileth never;
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise
within thy house for ever.

(Henry Williams Baker 1821 – 1877)

Prayers of Adoration

Lord, we adore you, our Good Shepherd;
always there, always watchful.

Your fold is the space you hold for us, where
we know we are loved.

Although dangers surround us, and in
foolishness we may stray,
you have our back.

So many sheep, yet you know us all by
name.

Lord, we adore you, our Good Shepherd.

Amen

Prayer of Confession and Forgiveness

Forgive us, Lord, when we exclude those you
have called into your fold:

those on the fringes,

those we are uncomfortable with,

those of differing lifestyles and faiths.

Help us to speak with the voice of the Good
Shepherd, calling all to a place of safety;

to a relationship of trust and a common
identity in your name, celebrating diversity
and bound by your love.

Lord, who lays down your life for your sheep,
how can we doubt your forgiveness?

Arms once stretched out upon a cross now
close in embrace, as we return.

Enfolded, may we know the fullness of love
that lives to forgive, and forgives that we
might live.

Amen

Introduction

Our gospel reading forms part of a passage starting in Chapter 7: Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Festival of Tabernacles (or Booths). Jesus has healed a man born blind, so people are trying to work out if he is of God or not; if he is a prophet or not; if he is the Messiah or not? who is the true leader and ruler of the true people of God? And, who has the proper authority to include or exclude people? Jesus saw the common people of his time as sheep without a shepherd, who had been failed by their leaders.

Reading John 10 v 7 – 18 Jesus the Good Shepherd

⁷ So Jesus said again, "I am telling you the truth: I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All others who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Those who come in by me will be saved; they will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only in order to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come in order that you might have life—life in all its fullness.

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep. ¹² When the hired man, who is not a shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees a wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away; so the wolf snatches the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ The hired man runs away because he is only a hired man and does not care about the sheep. ¹⁴⁻¹⁵ I am the good shepherd. As the Father knows me and I know the Father, in the same way I know my sheep and they know me. And I am willing to die for them. ¹⁶ There are other sheep which belong to me that are not in this sheep pen. I must bring them, too; they will listen to my voice, and they will become[a] one flock with one shepherd.

¹⁷ "The Father loves me because I am willing to give up my life, in order that I may receive it back again. ¹⁸ No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own free will. I have the right to give it up, and I have the right to take it back. This is what my Father has commanded me to do."

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Comment

The setting for the reading is the open countryside where shepherds would often spend days away from home, allowing their flocks to graze. At night the shepherd would often lead the flock to a stone pen for protection from wild animals or robbers. The pen didn't have a 5-bar gate as our modern farmers would use but instead the farmer would lie down across the entrance to protect the animals from danger. A few flocks might be gathered together in the same fold. The shepherd would call out their own flock in the morning and the sheep would recognise his voice and follow him back to the open pasture.

In several places in the Old Testament, the image of a shepherd and sheep is used to describe the relationship between Israel and her leaders. David is the shepherd boy looking after his father's sheep who becomes a shepherd of Israel and the 'King after God's own heart'. Later, the prophet Ezekiel describes the leaders in his time as being unfaithful shepherds and God as the true shepherd. Jeremiah describes the leaders as having driven people away rather than caring for them. God was ultimately the shepherd of Israel but various leaders chosen to lead his people had failed in their responsibilities. So, God promised to send the true shepherd, the Messiah, to care for the sheep.

So too in the New Testament, the other gospel writers describe how Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep. At one point, Jesus refers to his disciples as 'my little flock'.

Jesus explains he is the shepherd – the gate for the sheep-pen to keep them safe from danger. Those who came before him were thieves and robbers. The words used here were the same as those used for Judas and for Barabbas respectively. Some suggest Jesus rejected those who either tried to force his own claim to be Messiah; to submit to the Romans to preserve their own wealth and status, or who wished to stir up armed revolt against the authorities. I think Jesus is more likely to be referring to false prophets who preceded him.

Many of our leaders in public life or corporations today are somewhat remote. They don't know all of their people. They are more focussed on measuring outputs and targets. It's often suggested in the media that certain businessmen or politicians are 'in it for their own profit'. By contrast, Jesus knows his 'flock' by name and will meet the danger facing his flock head-on and, if necessary, take on the fate facing his sheep.

Jesus came to bring life in all its fullness. By contrast, our society has offered materialism which people increasingly find unsatisfying. If lockdown has taught us anything, it is that we prize relationship and human contact over material goods. As sheep, if we recognise and listen to the voice of Jesus then we find in him alone the fullness of life. Both individually and as a church we are called out as we listen and respond to the voice of Jesus.



Jesus contrasts the good shepherd with the hired hand. Even though both have the same responsibilities (to care for the sheep), the hired hand has no incentive to remain in the face of danger to tend to the flock. By contrast, a good shepherd has no business looking after his own interest; his priority is the sheep. This sacrificial notion of the shepherd described by John is a new idea in his gospel together with his knowledge of his sheep. Those people who followed Jesus have recognised through his ministry of teaching and healing, how he has a heart for the common people. They have responded with their won hearts by following him, recognising his claim to

be sent by God as Israel's true king. He says that just as he knows God and the Father knows him, so Jesus knows his flock and they know him. Isn't it amazing Jesus has such deep knowledge of us and love for each one of us that he is willing to die for us!

Jesus explains that because he lays down his life for his sheep, so the Father loves him. He tells how, as an act of obedience to God, he will lay down his life as an act of love for his flock but will take it up again through his resurrection. He notes he does this through the perfect accord between him and God who has authority over life and death. What happened to Jesus in the Easter story is not about what people did to Jesus; rather it is about what Jesus did for us. It provides us with a model to illustrate the cost of care.

How can we follow the example of Jesus and be good shepherds today? It goes without saying we can recognise the sacrificial care shown by those in the NHS, key workers and public servants during the pandemic. But, for us, we can begin by thinking about whose voice we listen and respond to. Is it the voice of Jesus and does it put the needs of the sheep first?

How can we better know the people around us and create relationships – with our neighbours and those we meet in social circles? For some years we have been wrestling with the challenge of how to reach out and offer Jesus to the hundreds of people who would normally use our buildings at Christchurch each week. As we move out of lockdown, we have a unique opportunity to find new ways to engage with them; to know them by name and care about their well-being and safety; and the issues that matter to them to prevent them from enjoying the 'life in all its fullness' of which Jesus spoke.

Even in our privileged society in the UK, we don't have to look very far to find need – loneliness, isolation, child poverty, the need for inclusion and acceptance, the need to start to respond to the climate emergency. These are all real and present issues for which people are looking for answers. If we listen to the needs of others, and care about and talk about these issues which are also close to God's heart, then people will listen to our voices and want to be part of our flock.

Prayers for Others

We pray for the lost sheep of this world: for politicians striving to hang onto power and influence; for leaders of the nations who have forgotten to serve the common good.

We pray for the lost sheep of this world: for those who follow the fashions and frivolities of today at the expense of tomorrow; for those swept along by the crowd on tides of prejudice and easy judgements.

We pray for the lost sheep of this world: for those who wander off on their own to escape from reality; for those who are led astray, away from safety and well-being.

We pray for the lost sheep of this world: for those who take what they have for granted; for those unable to give thanks for the things they have.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn – I will sing the wondrous story (Singing the Faith 323)

Our closing hymn reminds us that, even when we go astray, Jesus finds us, raises us up and lays us gently back on the narrow way.

1. I will sing the wondrous story
of the Christ who died for me;
how He left the realms of glory
for the cross of Calvary.

*Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story
of the Christ who died for me,
sing it with the saints in glory,
gathered by the crystal sea.*

2. I was lost, but Jesus found me,
found the sheep that went astray,
raised me up and gently led me
back into the narrow way.

3. Faint was I, and fears possessed me,
bruised was I from many a fall;
hope was gone, and shame distressed me,
by his hand I'm safely led.

4. Days of darkness still come o'er me;
sorrow's path O often tread;
but the Saviour still is with me,
by his hand I'm safely led.

5. He will keep me till the river
rolls its waters at my feet;
then he'll bear me safely over
where the loved ones I shall meet.

(Francis Harold Rowley 1854 – 1952)

Blessing

Lord, when we feel lost and confused;
When we are tired by caring for others;
When we're tempted by the wolves;
When we're enjoying good pasture and rest -
Help us to be faithful sheep.

Amen

Question to ponder

- Who can we better get to know and create relationship, even if only by picking up the phone to call them?

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