

Sunday Sermon Notes – 4th Sunday of Easter – 3rd May 2020

From Rev'd Jilleen Chamber

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

This Sunday is the 4th Sunday of Easter and that means it is Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year we have a reading from John chapter 10 about Jesus the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep and lays down his life for them. The reading this year is from: John 10: 1-10 – we have many images packed into these ten verses: a known shepherd, sheep who follow, the gate, salvation, freedom and abundance as well as warnings of thieves, bandits and strangers. The picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is comforting and one of our favourite and enduring images. It appears in stained glass windows in many churches including St Matthias in Woodford.

How do you feel about being called a sheep? We all like pictures of fat woolly sheep in green pastures. We love to see lambs frisking playfully about their mothers. And we sometimes say a sleeping baby is 'a little lamb' or 'sleeping like a lamb'. But are we really like contented fat woolly sheep or little lambs? Any parent will tell you that the lamb-like sleeping baby can transform when awake – into everything and refusing to be pacified. And adult sheep can be just as ornery.

Have you ever wondered why God uses this imagery for human beings? W. Phillip Keller, who for a number of years was a shepherd, notes in 'A shepherd looks at Psalm 23': "It is no accident that God has chosen to call us sheep. The behaviour of sheep and human beings is similar in many ways. Our mob instincts, our fears and timidity, our stubbornness and stupidity, our perverse habits are all parallels of profound importance." Not an inspiring assessment is it?

The wonderful and amazing thing is that God still chooses to love us. In the passage from John 10: 3 we read: 'He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.' He knows us by name!

In the 1st century, shepherds did not have good social standing and were perceived as being rough, dirty and smelly, a bit free with the truth and sheep stealers. Also, the Greek and Roman rulers were presented politically as 'good shepherds' who fostered abundance and security for the empire's subjects. In reality, life was anything but for subjected nations.

In the Bible, we see God revealed as a very different sort of shepherd. God as the shepherd of Israel who cares for his people is a very familiar image in the Old Testament. Particularly in the much loved 23rd Psalm. Ask anyone their favourite Psalm and that is probably the one they will pick and many non-religious people will at least know of it. Why do we love it? The Psalm presents a wonderful picture of God's loving kindness, blessing, care and provision for his people even in difficult and dangerous times.

Jesus takes up and expands this picture of God's care in John chapter 10. Jesus reveals himself as The Good Shepherd who calls and cares for the sheep and the one who remains in the gateway of the sheepfold. He is the gate that keeps the sheep in safety and protects them from predators, thieves and bandits, and from everything and everyone who would seek to harm or destroy them.

He is the shepherd who provides freedom, good pasture and the one who came so that the sheep may have salvation and abundant life. In John 10: 11 Jesus spells it out even further saying that he is The Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. But what sort of salvation and abundant life is Jesus offering to us?

We acknowledge that we need a Saviour who will save us from our sins and reconcile us to God the Father. But do we really need a Shepherd for our everyday lives? Do we need protection from thieves and bandits? We have food and shelter though many are facing increasing difficulties with the loss of employment. We dwell in a safe land and our lives are relatively safe from harm. There is an invisible enemy but so far we appear to be doing well and our restrictions are being eased a little.

Have you ever thought of the thieves and bandits in your life – the ones that destroy your sense of safety and freedom? The ones that cause your life to be less than abundant and affect how we live our lives and also our relationships with other people. They can be fears, anxiety, stress, bad habits, addictions, anger, jealousy, unforgiveness, and the list can go on. Excessive worry over your own or a loved one's health issues can also rob us and cause sleepless nights. Now, if we are honest, we will all put our hand up for one or more of the above and even others that aren't on the list.

All I can say is that I have found Jesus the Good Shepherd to be the answer. He is the one we can turn to and know that his care for us is tender and gentle – as a mother cares for a small child or a shepherd for a lost lamb. Sometimes we resist praying over a situation or accepting that there is something we need to change in our lives. We think we should be able to sort it out for ourselves – and we end up getting exhausted and the mountain only seems to get larger. Are we afraid to let Jesus into our lives? We often forget that Jesus is waiting for us to turn to him.

What comes to mind for me is the picture of: Footprints in the Sand. The reminder that Jesus carries us in difficult times. In Matthew 11: 28-30 we read:

'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Sometimes, all we can do is pray for the strength and courage to live through a difficult time or situation in our lives or to change our life. I often think of the Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Did you notice what Jesus said in verse 10? 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' (John 10: 10) This is a full life that Jesus is talking about. A flourishing life lived with Jesus' peace and joy in our lives: a peace and joy that makes a difference to how we live our life and to our relationships with other. It is not a life that is half-lived in sorrow, fear or anxiety.

And what does Jesus mean by abundance and what makes for an abundant life? Often we tend to think of an abundant life as one where we have everything we want. Some preachers have taken it to extremes and promised wealth, great jobs, big houses and flashy cars. Is that what Jesus the Good Shepherd was really talking about? Is that what life is really about? Sometimes we can be trapped into thinking it is.

What do sheep need? Food, water, shelter, care and protection from fear and an occasional shearing. Jesus is not promising his sheep riches or wealth or freedom from adversity (ie shearing). He is promising us love, family, care, provision for our daily needs, and protection from fear and always his strength and courage to help us overcome the difficulties and vagaries of life. When we have these, our life is really abundant. We have room to grow and our lives become fruitful.

One of the hymns we had listed for today is: '*Be still my soul*' – the tune is Finlandia.

Be still my soul: the Lord is on your side; bear patiently the cross of grief and pain;
leave to your God to order and provide; in every change he faithful will remain.

Be still, my soul: your best, your heavenly friend through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and give you his peace.
Amen.

Blessings Jilleen