

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 4th Sunday of Easter

25th April 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

One of religious art's favourite images is of Christ as the Good Shepherd. On this, the fourth Sunday of Easter, the readings are always about it, including the twenty-third Psalm. It's known as Good Shepherd Sunday.

We might think that those words would have lost some of their force, written as they were for a rural society in which shepherds guided and fed their flock, knew each by name, searched for any that strayed and defended them if necessary with their lives. But the image is still a powerful symbol of Jesus's self-sacrificing love.

Jesus's words 'I am the good shepherd' are part of the series of sayings in John's Gospel which begin with the words 'I am': 'I am the bread of life', 'I am the true vine', 'I am the light of the world'. In using the phrase he identifies himself with the God of Moses, whose name is 'I AM', or *Yahweh* (a name so holy that in the Jewish tradition it was never spoken, but instead a circumlocution was used - *Elohim*, translated in English as 'Lord', or in French 'l'Éternel'). So the words 'I am' confirmed to the first hearers of this Gospel Jesus's commitment to the purposes and work of God, and his closeness to the one he called Father.

The 'good' shepherd is one who is not merely competent, but 'good' in the sense of consistently giving in love and service, committed to the care of the flock, contrasted with the 'hired hands' who are invested in themselves and their own security. It's a poignant reminder to the church today - both individually and as an institution we need to ask ourselves: in all that we do, are we aiming to be good, or simply competent?

In looking for a picture for the front of today's service sheet I came across a painting by Pieter Brueghel the Younger entitled *The Good Shepherd*. It shows a shepherd lying on the ground, who has been knocked over by a vicious-looking wolf about to sink its teeth into his neck. The sheep are scattering into the woods behind. It's the opposite of the sort of pastoral picture you usually find. Instead it is shocking, violent, urgent. When we read reports of a natural disaster or terrorist attack, we often see two basic types of response: those whose instinct for self-preservation and survival makes them run for cover, and those who run towards the crisis to see how they can help. This short Gospel passage refers no less than five times to the shepherd laying down his life for the sheep. It is picked up in our Epistle today: 'We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.' And the writer of the First Letter of John points out that faith in action is the only sort of faith that is authentic: 'How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?'

There's another echo of Christ laying down his life for those he loves in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, when Peter and John are called to account for how they have healed a lame beggar on their way into the temple. Peter looks back into the story of Israel, in which God had founded the kingdom not

on any of Jesse's tall and powerful sons but on David, the youngest and weakest. He quotes Psalm 118 which describes the choosing of David with the words, 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone'. Peter identifies the rejected stone as Christ, in whose crucifixion he was rejected by the builders, yet in whose resurrection he had become the cornerstone of forgiveness and eternal life.

So the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd, like the Gospel as a whole, is not all gentle and pastoral. But it *is* authentic and real, something we can base our life on and be strengthened by when facing down life's difficulties. The cornerstone is the one that holds everything together when everything else seems in danger of falling apart.

The image of the shepherd is one reason why Psalm 23 is often read in times of distress. The Psalm is actually full of images, for it is about how God relates to us at different times in our lives, good and bad – in green pastures (normal life), still waters (our times of refreshment, the times we have felt fully alive, time spent with our loved ones), right pathways (the times we have had to take difficult decisions) as well as the valley of the shadow of death (where many in the world feel they have been over the last year). All the stages of what it means to be human, which Christ shared with us. Throughout our lives God is present to us, faithful to us, and we can never be separated from his goodness and mercy, whatever happens to us and around us. Psalm 23 was written in response to an experience of exile, when the people of Israel saw a face of God they hadn't seen before, a God who suffered out of love. They felt closer to him in their hardship than they had in the time of plenty.

Perhaps it's that which brings people back to this Psalm, over and over again. A few years ago I had a friend who had to spend eight months in hospital in London. He was admitted to hospital after a stroke and, a few weeks later, was diagnosed with cancer. He was French and spoke almost no English, so he found it virtually impossible to communicate with the hospital staff. Whenever I visited him one of the few things that would bring him real solace was saying the words together of Psalm 23: 'L'Eternel est mon berger'.

I was reminded of this last week when I attended online the launch of a new book by Claire Gilbert, the Director of the Westminster Abbey Institute, called *Miles to go before I sleep* – a quotation from the poet Robert Frost. The book takes the form of a diary, written originally in emails to her family and friends, about the experience of being diagnosed in her early 50s with an incurable blood cancer and given a life expectancy of ten years provided she submitted to a gruelling set of treatments lasting two and a half years. At the book launch she was interviewed by her publisher, and both of them acknowledged the raw emotion which the book contains, but somehow the launch was one of the most uplifting hours I have spent in the whole of the last year.

There were some memorable one-liners, such as when Claire said of being in hospital, 'You are in hell but attended by angels', or when asked about her faith said 'I wouldn't say I believe in God but somehow I can't not believe in God', and 'I haven't solved the problem of evil but I am confronting it'. The most moving extract was her description of going into a barber's shop to have her head shaved once she began to lose her hair during the first course of treatment. She was looked after by a Kurdish barber who treated her with deep compassion, but she emerged from his shop so filled with compassion for the suffering he

had described of his own people that it had put her own ordeal into a different perspective. She wasn't remotely pious, yet the whole conversation was shot through with the kind of authentic faith that pervades the twenty-third Psalm. 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.' The phrase I was left thinking of at the end of the evening was Paul's comment in his Letter to the Romans that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ – death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, not anything else in all creation. Nothing.

'L'Eternel est mon berger.' Thanks be to God.

Amen.