

## ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

### WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – 21<sup>st</sup> April 2024

#### All Saints' Marseille

*Jane Quarmby, Licensed Lay Minister*

Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday, following our Gospel Reading where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd. Shepherds crop up 24 times in the Bible, in both the Old Testament and the New. In the early days when the people were nomadic, living in tents and constantly on the move, they were all shepherds. Sheep and people were interdependent, the sheep providing wool for clothing and fabrics, milk, cheese, and meat; and in their turn dependent upon the people to provide food, water, shelter and protection. Over the centuries as people settled and became farmers, shepherds were still vital as were their flocks of goats and sheep. In the Middle Ages fortunes were made from wool and in England the enormous churches built on the woolpack still survive today in the Cotswolds and East Anglia. Abraham, David, Abel, Moses, were all shepherds of sheep before they became shepherds of people.

Everyone in Jesus' time and before, would have been very familiar with what a shepherd did. Not so nowadays when for many in the western world they only know sheep from programmes on TV, or as a pack of indeterminate meat wrapped in plastic in the supermarket. As Margaret Feinberg writes in her book *Scouting the Divine – Searching for God in Wine, Wool and Wild Honey*: "What does it mean to know that Jesus is the Good Shepherd when the only place you've encountered sheep is in the petting zoo?"

It's a good question and it's all too easy to take for granted that people in church do know what a Good Shepherd is – otherwise how can you see Jesus in that role, or even make head or tail of a lot of the Bible?

We still have working shepherds today and things haven't changed much from David's day in terms of the job. The shepherd is responsible for protecting the

sheep from thieves, predators like wolves – farmers all around us are losing sheep to the re-introduced wolves - ensuring they have the right food and clean water to drink, moving them onto clean pasture to limit infection, healing them when they are sick, shearing them to keep them comfortable and disease free, and keeping them together and out of harm's way. Sheep will naturally wander off in search of the next green grass (as do people). Lambing season is busy, helping struggling ewes to deliver their lambs. Sheep don't respond well to being driven, but will happily trot along behind their trusted shepherd, following the sound of his (or her) voice. I think it was Tim Teusink who sent me a great cartoon of sheep having a party. They were all standing around wondering what to do until finally the sheepdog arrives with a pack of beer under its arm, when one sheep says to the rest: "Oh thank goodness, the sheepdog's arrived – now the party will get going!" They do need organising.

Being a shepherd isn't all fluffy white lambs skipping around green fields in the sunshine. Despite being waterproof sheep have an unerring instinct to get into trouble and, given half a chance, to die. Their waterproof wool is due to a rich content of lanolin which in damp or hot weather is actually stinky - as are their carers. If they don't have their lambs indoors I can guarantee they will wait until the wettest coldest night to produce in the corner of the field furthest away from their nice cosy barn. They need steering away from trouble and their shepherd needs to be with them in all weathers, rain or shine, snow and hail. A good shepherd is protective, attentive, observant, will do all they can to protect their flock. They have a strong bond with their sheep and will protect them at risk to their own lives. Even I have been reckless enough to beat off two curious cows from playing ball with a new born lamb, armed with a yard broom. It's not an easy, comfortable, 9 to 5 job, it's uncomfortable, smelly, muddy and heartbreaking at times. It's also joyous when your sheep run up to you and give you a big cheesy grin. (Yes, they do grin.)

So why does Jesus see himself as a shepherd? And us as sheep? In Mark chapter 6 verse 34 we read "Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and he had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd." In John's Gospel today Jesus says "I know my sheep, and they know me" and goes on to say he will sacrifice his life for his sheep. He will collect all his sheep that are scattered and they will listen to his voice. They will follow his voice.

Why is this image so strong throughout the Bible?

If we are Jesus's sheep – does that mean we are hard work, get ourselves into trouble, wander off and get lost, need to be cared for, loved, protected, get muddled and make wrong choices, are at risk from predators? I'd say we are. We too aren't always fragrant, skipping, happy, healthy creatures. Our predators may not be wolves but we have all too many human predators, intent on harming us, stealing from us, hurting us, killing us, wanting to dictate our lives and control us. We too need shelter, healing, love and care. We need help to point us towards making the right choices, to lead us in the right direction which gives us a fuller, richer life. We need, more than ever, the Good Shepherd to lead us away from war, aggression, exploitation, selfishness, greed, indifference to the suffering of others. There are all too many bad shepherds, keen to lead us astray.

We need to listen to his voice and come to him, bringing our friends, families and neighbours with us into one flock, where each one shares resources so that none go hungry or thirsty, or lack medical aid, where each one puts others first, and cares for the beautiful creation in which we live. Jesus didn't spend his time in luxurious surroundings, surrounded by the wealthy, the clever, the beautiful people of the day. He spent his time with the people at the bottom of the heap – the poor, the sick, the despised people like tax collectors, the smelly, homeless, uneducated, sick, ugly folk. He knew what human life was like in all its richness and its sadness, its sometimes brutal heart breaking reality.

Jesus doesn't drive us – he calls us to follow him. He cared for us so much that he gave his life to protect us. He went on ahead of his flock to show us the way, to give us new life. He didn't die for us to carry on following the wrong voices, getting lost and making the wrong decisions in our life, but to listen to him. To trust him to lead us to our own green pastures where we are safe and loved. Jesus has never forced us to follow him; in the same way that sheep will very quickly learn which of the all the voices they hear is the one of their shepherd, and trust in that voice and trot along behind, we need to recognise the voice of our shepherd and follow him.

If sheep are clever enough to know who their Good Shepherd is and recognise his voice, surely we humans should be?

Amen.