

## Sermon for Easter 3 2020

John 10 verses 4 and 5.

<sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”



When I read the references to Jesus being the shepherd and ponder the images of peace, quiet, trust and confidence that emerge I am reminded of a cartoon that was doing the rounds back in the 1990s. The image is twofold.

In the first image we have a shepherd quietly leading an orderly flock of sheep out into the fields. The shepherd appears to have a lovely relationship with the sheep and they are quietly following him.

The second image is that of a furious man, once again dressed as a shepherd, yelling and screaming and jumping up and down in a rage. He is waving his staff in the air and is showing anything but trust and affection. The sheep, instead of following quietly and peacefully, are terrified and have scattered. They can be seen panicked and disappearing over the hills in every direction.

When Jesus speaks of the shepherd it is always as a person committed to the well-being of the flock, in an extension to this we see Jesus as his being committed to the well-being of each one of us. He constantly encourages us to seek an understanding of the Father that will bring us confidence and peace.

Many of us have experienced the ranting, raving, lunatic shepherd, who terrifies us and drives us away. It is not necessarily a shepherd in the church. There are shepherds in every occupation on earth. Some shepherds are intelligent, caring and encouraging. Others are ignorant bullies who are determined to control every aspect of the lives of others. This is a fact of life now just as it was a fact of life in Jesus' time. Our task is to discern what form of shepherd we might be. Are we a shepherd who encourages and leads? Or are we a shepherd who bullies, criticises, and demands blind loyalty? Do we point forward with our shepherd staff? Or do we threaten the people around us with it, using it as a weapon?

Thankfully our Lord Jesus is the calm shepherd leading us, not driving us. He is the one who shows us the beauty of our faith and allows us to wonder, to question, to doubt, and ultimately, to grow in faith, trust and confidence.

Our Lord describes himself as being both the shepherd and the gate. He is the one who nurtures, and it is through him that we are granted eternal life. We have in our orders of service this phrasing which refers to our relationship with Jesus, *“in him, with him and*

*through him*". Jesus is the genuine Messiah. He is the one sent by God to bring salvation to all who would believe.

He creates a remarkable distinction between himself and those who have come in the past claiming to be the Messiah, and those in the present who he sees as being strangers to the flock and indeed, strangers to God. He speaks of them as being thieves and robbers who have not become Shepherds by following the truth. Rather than giving life, the true role of the Messiah, they bring death and destruction.

It is tempting to think that Jesus is taking a swipe at the Scribes and the Pharisees when he speaks of those who have not entered the fold in the right manner. This is, I think, a bit of a stretch. It is better not to use this teaching as a stick to point out fault, but rather to use it as an encouragement to look at our own life and how we interact with others. During this Easter season it is an opportunity for us to examine ourselves and to ponder whether we have responded appropriately to the Goodness of Jesus as our shepherd, or whether we have begun to wander from the fold.

Peter, in the letter we read today, is encouraging us to live our God given lives with grace, good conduct and mercy. He speaks of the possibility of criticism by others and he suggests that we concentrate on living Godly lives so that those who criticise us will see our good deeds.

We are to live our lives by doing the right thing. He teaches that we are to be obedient to the people put in authority over us. Not only obedient to the leaders of the church, but of our political leaders as well.

We who believe in Jesus live in freedom. This is the teaching of Peter. In saying this he is not suggesting that we live in freedom from responsibility. Rather he is teaching that we are free from the expectations of the world. We are free from peer pressure. We are free from secular expectation. We are free from the *"passions of the flesh"*. We are free from all that would *"wage war against our soul."*

This is not freedom from responsibility, but rather the freedom to live our lives as prescribed by our Lord and God. What could be more liberating than to be instructed to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbours as we love ourselves.

This brings us full circle. We are now back to the images of the shepherd and that all embracing, and challenging, question: "what sort of a shepherd am I"?

We know what sort of a shepherd Jesus is. We know the style of shepherd to which we are called. Do the people we care for quietly and contentedly follow us? Or do they scatter for the hills when they see us? We are the only ones who can answer this challenging question, and if the answer indicates that we are not as good a shepherd as we would like to be, we are the only ones who can change our behaviour.

In our prayers let us pray that the love of Christ will be the character that others will recognise and desire.