

Easter 4. 21 April 2024

John 10:11-18

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

Sermon... The Good Shepherd.

12 years ago Kathy and I travelled to Woodcroft Christian Centre. It was for an interview to be Vicar of Tidenham and Priest in Charge of St Briavels and Hewelsfield.

The rest as they say is history!

12 years later here I am still as Vicar... just! But with the same Gospel reading today as I had at my interview that day. John Chapter 10:11-18 which I had to preach. Tanya was on the interview panel... so it's all her fault, along with Tony Harris, Leonie Jones, Carol Stickland from Hewelsfield, Jean Sheraton from ST Briavels (bless Jean, her husband died a few weeks ago and his funeral is next Friday).

This reading is fantastic and it gave me some meaty themes to preach on 12 years ago... and those themes continue to be relevant.

Forgive me if there's some repetition from things I've said before. I guess after all this time it's not surprising. Remember that story of the new Vicar who preached a fantastic first sermon... everybody was in awe! Next week he preached the same one again. Yes... okay, it was good and worth hearing again. Then again... great, but can we have something else? Then again! What's going on? Well, when you start putting into practice the message of the sermon then we'll move on to the next things!

1. Discipleship

The first thing I spoke about all those years ago was discipleship. Discipleship, one of the biggest challenges for the Church and one of our major priorities here... the need for God's people to be serious and committed in their desire to know, love and serve Jesus Christ. To be dedicated followers of him in daily life... people hankering after and living out his words of life!

Our Parish Vision says, “We will seek to listen to God's call on our lives and endeavour to work out what it means for each of us to follow Jesus Christ day by day by living in the flow of his love and applying his teaching 24/7.”

Jesus says in verse 14 of John 10 “**I know my sheep and the sheep know me...**” This is a critical aspect of discipleship, our relationship to Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday... and I've had a request to tell another story which I've certainly told before!

Rich Actor Story...

A rich actor was holding a party and he invited all his friends... including a minister friend. At this party they had a meal and after the meal guests were invited to do an item of entertainment – a sketch, joke story etc... The actor seeing his minister opposite him said – why don't you recite the 23rd Psalm for us “The Lord is my shepherd”. Now the minister was reserved and shy in contrast to the outgoing extrovert actor. Reluctantly the minister agreed but said to his actor friend, “you're the actor, so I will do it if you will before me.” “Fine” said the actor.

He stood up and recited the 23rd Psalm –
“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”
all the intonations in the right place.. he finished
“and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever”.
AMAZING – applause.

The actor looked at the minister and said smugly ‘your turn my friend’

The minister then stood up and nervously and stumbling over the words he started
“The Lord is my shepherd”
and after a few mistakes he ended
“and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever”.

TOTAL quiet – the minister looked up to find out that several people were crying.
Then the actor stood up and said “Do you know the difference between us?
The difference is I know the Psalm, but he knows the shepherd!”

The Christian faith is all about knowing the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and journeying with Him in and through and beyond this earthly life to our ultimate destination, our heavenly home. To be his disciples, following him.

Jesus’ words in John’s Gospel speak of deep intimate relationship... between him and his Father... but also between himself and his followers... “I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” John 14:20
Elsewhere St Paul talks of living in Christ ... and Christ living in us. (Gal 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.
2 Cor 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.)

Out of this intimacy we walk where Jesus walks, we do what Jesus does... loving, healing, serving, praying, engaging. There’s depth here. We orientate our lives around the Lord following him rather than just expecting the Lord to orientate himself around us... and go out to find us! This a switch part of conversion! He gives himself to us and we give ourselves to him. We follow the shepherd wherever he leads... the Way of the Cross... we listen to hear his voice above all other voices that clamour for our attention and to gladly obey that voice.

And we need discernment to hear his voice above the other voices. That was something else I spoke about at my interview!

Discernment enables us to see clearly and act wisely and appropriately. Discernment enables us to know what is divine and what is merely human... what is of him and what is of us. Discernment helps us to know the Good Shepherd from the thief, the wolf in sheep’s clothing. Discernment enables us to understand what is right and wrong, what is true and false in discipleship, in mission, in responsible positions. Discernment helps us to be the church God wants us to be. Discernment is fundamental to spiritual growth. Spiritual knowledge without discernment is useless. St Peter of Damascus says that we need discernment in all things so that we may rightly assess every form of action. Discernment alerts us to erroneous ideas and actions and keeps us free from delusion.

This call to be a disciple, to be a follower of Jesus... goes out to us all. It’s not just Vicar’s and Associate Priests and Readers and Churchwardens, PCC members and holy joe’s who are disciples! Jesus is calling wide and far for people to follow him today as he did yesterday. Why? So he can lead us, me, you, them into the fullness of life, into all truth, into the way of life and peace and the fullness of joy! For him to transform us to be the people he has called us to be and in turn be God’s instruments in the transformation of others.

It’s one thing to be a good person doing good things. It’s another thing to attend church, and another thing to be a church member... but it’s another thing altogether to be a disciple.

Parish of Tidenham, keep following the Good Shepherd and listening to him... and be prepared to go where calls you to go....

2. (The second thing I spoke about at my interview was mission)

Verse 16 of John 10 says “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also.”

Other sheep... the Gentile sheep. Who are the equivalent of Gentile sheep in our communities today? Non churched, the dechurched, the lapsed.

They must hear the Good news about the Good Shepherd... that there is a God... not an impersonal distant uncaring God... but a God as revealed in Jesus the Good Shepherd, who loves and cares for you, me and for this world, a God who walks with us, never leaves or forsakes us, a God who wants to reside in us... give us wholeness, life, peace, joy and hope. A God who wants to shine light into darkness, bring hope where there is despair, healing where there is pain, life where there is death!

God calls the Church, his disciples to join him in seeking out sheep not of this sheep pen.

Elsewhere in John’s Gospel Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” John 20:21. Or, perhaps Matthew 28:19-20... “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

There is the call for us to go from the comfort of church buildings and church gatherings to find the lost sheep and bring them home... To chat with those we know in our communities... to hear others’ stories and share our stories of faith... not just to be attendees at church worship or social events, but to be disciples.

The missionary call may be uncomfortable but like discipleship it is absolutely necessary for the life of the church. “Bob Jackson talks about churches having the choice of a comfortable death or an uncomfortable life.”

Parish of Tidenham, never lose the community and mission focus... and the call for US to make disciples!

We look to the Good Shepherd to know where we are being led and what we are to be, do and say. We need the Good Shepherd to lead the church in mission and sharing faith.

3. Discipleship and Mission and...

And a final thing, which I also spoke about at my interview..., responsibility.

“I am the Good shepherd” and “I lay down my life for the sheep” verse 11. Jesus, the Good Shepherd provides the model for taking responsibility in today’s church. The Good Shepherd leads, tends and protects and serves... looks out for the welfare of others. The Good Shepherd does what needs to be done and has the right heart and motivation.

At my ordination to the priesthood I was charged to “Keep the Good Shepherd always before me as the pattern of my calling.” Those with any kind of responsibility in the church need to keep their eyes firmly fixed on Jesus in order to meet the challenges of discipleship and mission. This takes humility, obedience and a willing heart, accountability and support.

This was true 12 years ago and it is certainly true now!

The welfare of the sheep, God’s people, is most certainly linked to mature responsibility in all part of church life not just leadership.

Every member of the Body of Christ, the Church, is called to take responsibility for their behaviour and relationships.

Every member of the Body of Christ, the Church, is called to take responsibility for the part they have been called to be and do.

We need a variety of ministries to be discovered and exercised so that the Good News of Jesus can spread and the church can grow. Jesus didn’t do it all himself. He chose 12 to share his work and then 72. St Paul talks

about the variety of gifts and ministries in his letters in order to build up the body of Christ. We need teachers, pastors, missionaries, administrators, musicians, people to work with young and old, intercessors etc....

And we need to retain that wider sense of vocation in our lives. As well as being a priest I am a husband and a father. My calling extends to these areas of life and others' too. I'm also occasionally a musician – a little rusty because that bit of vocation has to take a back seat to other things!

The church often been poor at recognising vocation outside church life and therefore we have struggled to connect faith and life.

Parish of Tidenham. In whatever calling, ministry, responsibility, leadership role you may find yourself doing, have a heart like that of the Good Shepherd... who came to serve, not to be served. Mark 10:45

Let the Good Shepherd lead us, protect us and guide us in our next steps individually and corporately.