



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 25, 2021

Scripture Passages: 1 John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have a look at a picture with me – it's a fresco from the catacomb of Priscilla in Rome: It depicts Jesus as the good shepherd – I really like this one – it's interesting - because if you look closely you'll see that he hasn't got a sheep on his shoulders, he has a goat – check out the horns.



And if you look up in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, you'll find the parable of the sheep and the goats. The goats don't do so well in this story - as they argue with Jesus. But this fresco and this image – often portrayed this way – seems to say that the sinful (represented by the goat) are lovingly sought out by Jesus every bit as much as the faithful (represented by the sheep).

And then if again we look up Luke, chapter 15 and read the parable of the lost sheep, (you know the one where the shepherd has 100 sheep – 99 are obedient to his voice and are safe but there's one who goes missing. The shepherd for love of that stray one, leaves the others to go looking) it looks as if this story is also being referenced – just to round out Jesus' identity as the Good shepherd with the one, stray carried on his shoulders.

I reckon that the goat around Jesus' shoulders says that the person being buried was hedging their bets a bit – not assuming that they would be counted among the faithful – and humbly understanding that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God.

I love the conflation of these all these stories in this one image – it gives me comfort – as I'm sure it was intended to do for the early Christians for whom these images were so beloved and numerous.

There are hundreds upon hundreds of them in the Catacombs – it became very very popular – especially after the fourth century.

It was an important picture because, in a society where the survival of the fittest was the norm, the image of the Good Shepherd demonstrated God's essential, core nature as love and gentleness and care for us.

It's deeply embedded in our common language as Christians. In fact the word 'pastor' – is latin for shepherd – and it's used over 200 times in the whole of the Bible. As a result its resonance is deep and fundamental to our understanding of who we are as children of God and it speaks to the substance of our relationship with Jesus.

However, it's also a very familiar image and as ever – if we are to seek for a deeper level of understanding our scriptures, it's important to be careful of that familiarity and perhaps try and move back behind it in order to understand this image a little better and the relationship it speaks to.

Because although this image may have been learned and internalized in childhood, it releases much deeper truths as we grow in our understanding and experience on our Christian journey.

Being a city dweller all my life, I'd never come face to face with a real live sheep before, that is, until I visited my parents in law who live in a traditional Wiltshire village at the edge of the Salisbury Plain in England. Wiltshire is still a very agricultural county much to the delight of my children who feel as if they are stepping back in time whenever we visit their grandparents - and it is sheep country.

The village Mum and Dad live in is called Market Lavington – and that's a clear reference to its past days as a place where the herds of sheep would be led down off the plain and be washed in the sheep dip romantically called "the fishes" these days, in order to be presented in the medieval Market place in the centre of the village for sale.

There are still small herds of sheep in fields dotted around the village.

They're not God's brightest creatures, it has to be said. And they do have a kind of herd mentality. They're pretty vulnerable too – no pointy teeth or claws to defend themselves with.

But they're also loyal and they stick together – and they're great followers with the aid of a sheepdog or two. They're inclined to wander and get into trouble if they aren't supervised with the odd growl or baring of teeth.

But it's their relationship with the farmer that's really interesting. They do actually respond to his/her voice.

And by experience the farmer knows exactly how to call them. They find security in that voice. The farmer is the one that protects them. For their part they are completely dependent on that protection and guidance. They aren't wild animals – they would quickly die out on the plain either by fox or by misadventure or just plain exposure. They need the safety of the enclosure and the certainty of daily meals - and the company of the flock.

You can see why in an agrarian society that the image of sheep and shepherds was and is so redolent of meaning – it was just part of life – as it still is in deepest Wiltshire. In fact, the frequency of the pastoral metaphor in the bible shows its power as an archetypal image.

And it turns out that it was deeply ingrained not only in Christian culture, but, as scholars point out, in ancient near eastern culture in general. It was a common metaphor for kingship – which eloquently spelled out both the responsibility of the king and the relationship that he had with his people – his flock. Monarchy was then as it is now, a complicated concept, it was never unconnected with responsibility. It was probably most closely related to the Christian concept of stewardship of the earth and its resources. Great privilege has responsibility attached to it.

And building on this cultural understanding with deep roots, the Gospel writer John, makes the point that since Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the leader of the flock, then being followers or sheep of that shepherd means that we are those who find their life and well-being in his care.

But this is where it gets intense.

So far, so good. We have been comforted by the image of the shepherd and the sheep. Now for the challenge. Because that flock of believers that Jesus was talking to, and indeed, this flock of believers here in Niagara, wasn't simply gathered around a comforting image of protection.

They were gathered around a mind-blowing event that had cosmic consequences. They were gathered around an almost unthinkable level of commitment and selflessness that they saw in Jesus. They were gathered around the cross.

Around Jesus' voluntary and loving surrender of life for our sake. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, as he says, the one who laid down his life for the sheep – all of us – every single sheep, and if I may, goats too – and who was raised to life once again, validating his sacrifice and promise.

Jesus connects the Good Shepherd with the cross. "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (10:11). Taken together, the Good Shepherd and the Cross are two very powerful symbols for the unity of all believers both then and now.

To me, this reading about the sheep knowing the voice of its master is also very evocative of other incidents – of the other “knowings” - in the Gospels that we’ve been reading over these past weeks: of Mary and Jesus in the Easter garden – when Jesus called Mary’s name and she suddenly knew him - of Thomas whose cry of recognition “My Lord and my God!” when seeing Jesus and knowing that all the disciples had told him was true, that Jesus really was alive and present to him - and also when the disciples on the road to Emmaus realized who they’d been conversing with. When Jesus broke bread with them, they knew him - Did not our hearts burn within us as he opened the scriptures to us? Did we not recognize his voice, did we not hear his truth?

This tells us that even in the midst of the fog of fear brought on by a global Pandemic the good shepherd is our guide and our protector. And even when life circumstances and the people round us like hired hands whose commitment to us is loose or like wolves who cause us to be scattered and confused we can still count on the good shepherd to lead us through one of the scariest experiences of our lives.

And even when we are beset by skepticism and doubt – because we have been formed and shaped by the promise and the love in Jesus’ voice, and because we have been dependent upon his care and protection and most especially because there is no other way to pass through this life safely but more importantly with an abundance of joy and meaning, we can always be called home by the voice of the great shepherd of the sheep who has laid down his life for us.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.