

Sermon Easter 4 Year A 2023

The fourth Sunday of Easter is now commonly known as ‘Good Shepherd Sunday.’ For centuries this Sunday was observed on the *third* Sunday of Easter, but the reforms of last century shifted it to this week. It is good to have a yearly reminder of such an important biblical motif. As I have said on other occasions, the Christian faith would be severely impoverished without this image of Christ the Good Shepherd. The image, of course, builds on the rich Old Testament motif: of David the shepherd king, of the 23rd psalm, and even of the prophet Ezekiel who fiercely warns against the *bad* shepherds of Israel. Importantly, in the Old Testament, the image of shepherd is applied to God himself. *God* is the shepherd of Israel. Other ancient sources are somewhat dismissive of shepherds, but the biblical record is entirely positive. In part perhaps because of their role in the economy and as part of a subsistence lifestyle, but also their essential role in supporting the sacrificial system of the Temple.

In the gospels, we remember the shepherds who first do homage at the manger of Bethlehem and so point us both towards Jesus’ ministry amongst those on the margin - literally those outside the town - but also his role as the sacrificial lamb. John the Baptist recognises this on the banks of the Jordan River when he declares Jesus as *the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*. In the Christian imagination, the image of the Good Shepherd is mostly shaped by the parables, especially that of the Lost Sheep. But the heart of Christian reflection on the image comes from the sustained reflection of John 10. There Christ describes himself not only as the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for the sheep, but also the gate of the sheepfold. The climax of the reading we hear today is heard is, *I came that they may have life and have it abundantly*. The rich play of imagery at work in John 10 finds its fullest meaning in the light of the Resurrection, which is why we hear it now in this season of Eastertide.

But our consideration of Christ as *shepherd* inevitably must lead us to our consideration of his people as *sheep*. Now, we must be frank and admit that sheep are neither the most interesting nor the most engaging and certainly not the most personable of God’s good creatures. It is not without good cause that sheep are regarded as stubborn, as smelly, and as stupid... Any of you who have spent any time on farms might know how difficult it actually is to get sheep to cooperate with you. The less appealing aspects of being a sheep are already conveyed in the parables.

Sheep are those who might wander off, get lost and get themselves into trouble, and risk the well-being of the shepherd. As we know Christ the Good Shepherd takes on this risk completely, even to the cost of his own life. He indeed lays down his life for the sheep. But the uncomfortable truths of what it means to be a sheep are further highlighted in the text placed before us today. Sheep are vulnerable. They are susceptible to thieves and brigands, who come to *steal and kill and destroy*.

Safety, though, comes quite simply by *listening*. Life and well-being come simply by responding to the voice of the shepherd. Familiarity with the voice of the shepherd means the sheep will trust the shepherd and will follow him. *When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they know his voice*. Indeed, is this not what being a disciple literally means? To be a disciple is to be one who follows. We go where we are led. We follow because we trust the One who leads. This is the Christian life. This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus. A believer in Jesus is one who trusts him to lead them.

Now, being a follower, being ‘one of the flock’ is *not* something that is seen in a very positive light in our cultural context. To hear, ‘*Oh, you’re just a sheep*’ is not meant as a compliment! It is a derogatory term. And to be called a sheep in such a way – or even called a ‘follower’ – is frequently applied to those who have faith, who belong to an organized religion, and who submit to a higher authority. To be called a ‘sheep’ suggests that religious people are stupid, who blindly follow their leader, and who have no intelligence to think for themselves. Religious people are ‘part of a flock’ and judged incapable of independent or critical thought.

It is a difficult thing to realise this about ourselves. And it is a difficult thing to realise that this is how much of the world views *us*. But in part, this is a charge we must be willing to humbly accept. As painful as it is. As much as we want to reject the charge and to balance the judgment. And as much as we might want to respond with some sharp barbs of our own, the truth remains we *are* part of a flock! We *do* follow where we are led. Independent thought is *not* a particularly Christian virtue. Faith, yes. Humility, yes. Trust, yes. But independence, autonomy, and individuality, not so much. Yes, there is a place for critical thought. We do not leave our brains at the door. But our brains and our reason are only helpful if they are shaped by grace and formed in the faith. Ultimately, Christians must be willing to put up their hands and say, *yes, I do seek to be led. Yes, I am happy follow*.

By a strange irony, this honesty is just about as counter-cultural and subversive as you get! Those who throw charges and accusations at believers for being sheep and 'blindly following' can do so from a striking position of group-think! Anyone who knows anything about the cultural context we now find ourselves will know how powerful the new orthodoxies of our culture can be! The power of so-called 'cancel culture' (in which all platforms to speak, to communicate, and even livelihood are denied you) for expressing the 'wrong' idea only comes from the mob!

Last week for some of our younger members I led a Zoom session looking at questions of Anglican Authority and the relationship between scripture, tradition and reason. One of the key ideas I proposed to the group was that of the 'givenness' of Christian faith. The living Christ speaks through the living Church. The Anglican formularies clearly give primacy to the Scriptures. The church cannot bind on the faithful anything that is not contained in scripture. And it cannot add anything that is contrary to scripture. Christian faith receives and it passes on. In other words, we listen and are led.

In the session last Monday, I subjected the participants to the work of English bishop and social reformer Charles Gore. In 1889 he wrote, *First, let it be clear that the Church's function is not to reveal truth. The revelation given once for all to the Apostles cannot be either diminished or added to. It is a faith "once for all delivered," and the New Testament emphasizes the Church's duty as simply that of "holding fast" and teaching what she has "received." ... It is thus of the very essence of the Christian revelation that, as originally given, it is final. Whatever is new to Christian theology in substance, is by that very fact, proved not to be of the faith.... novelty in revelation is equivalent to error.... It follows that the authority of the Church is of a more secondary character than is sometimes supposed. She is not a perpetual oracle of divine truth, an open organ of continuous revelation: she is not so much a "living voice" as a living witness to a "once-spoken voice."*

We all want to be the centre of the universe! We all want to celebrate independent thought and autonomy! We all think we have a better idea about what the faith should be, and what direction we should head, and how Christian life should be lived. Mostly these ideas only come to reinforce our weaknesses. But Christian faith seeks to free us – liberate us - from our weakness! And this can happen only if we allow ourselves to be led. Not blindly along some dark alley. But to life and light. We can follow because we can trust the One who speaks. And we can trust Jesus because in raising him from the dead God has shown to vindicate him. We can follow him because he is shown to be trustworthy and true. Amen.