

Sermon for Sunday 26th April 2015 (Good Shepherd Sunday)

Acts 4. 5-12

Ps. 23

1 John 3. 16-24

John 10. 11-18

Friends who have known me for a long time could tell you that I haven't always been very respectful of sheep. Let's face it, if you watch a flock of sheep in a field for 20 minutes you'll observe that all they ever seem to do (well, most of the time) is munch, munch, munch. What's going on in their little heads I wonder? So little has been my respect for these wee white dots on the hillside that I have even been known to whisper 'mint sauce' when passing them on a hill walk...Shocking I know.

It's not just me, though, is it? In general, sheep don't get a terribly positive press. Remember the film Babe (based on the book 'The Sheep Pig')? It was the sheep in the book, and the film, who were the stupid animals, whilst the pig, cat and other animals were clever... And a common criticism that's made of a group of people who act unthinkingly together is to say 'They're behaving like sheep.'

But today we've had one of the most well-known Psalms 'The Lord is my Shepherd', and the parable of the Good Shepherd as our readings. Jesus uses sheep as a model for discipleship. There must be something more to say about sheep, and what we can learn from them.

Well, yes - sheep, as I'm sure you'll tell me! – are more intelligent than they seem. Scientific research shows, for example, that sheep recognise the voice of the shepherd and won't respond to a voice they don't know. As Jesus says in our Gospel reading today, 'I know my own, and my own know me.' Sheep know the voice of the shepherd. Jesus taught this in the context of false teaching. He wanted his followers to beware of listening to the wrong voices. And the more time we spend with Jesus, through prayer and through reading Scripture, the more we are able to recognise his voice and can discern what is of the Holy Spirit.

With every election, it seems, comes an ever-louder clamour of voices. We have more media sources than ever to hear from our politicians – Twitter, Facebook - as well as the conventional ones. All politicians want us to trust them, of course, and mostly our instinct is not to! Partly because we tend to distrust those who say they have all the answers, and also because we know from experience that our trust can be misplaced. We have a choice to make soon, in this election - and we know that there is *One* in whom we can put our trust. One, who can help us hear, in the clamour of voices, those promises and policies from politicians which may be worth paying attention to, and help us to determine how to make our choice. But to help us hear God, we need to give space to listen to him, and time to invite that conversation into our hearts and minds.

I think the same is true of the Cascade Conversations on equal marriage which are happening in the SEC (of which the conversation that everyone is invited to after the service today, is part of). I hope none of us claim to have all the answers to all the issues raised. But it *is* my hope that, through a prayerful process of listening to each other – of giving space and time for that – we will hear ultimately hear God's voice.

So, sheep know the voice of the shepherd.

Something else that sheep can teach us is about trust. Firstly, they know their vulnerability. That's the reason why they stick together. In John's Letter he writes 'If anyone has the world's goods and see his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?' Our togetherness as disciples is partly about recognising our dependency on each other, in recognising the needs of others and willingly meeting those needs. And of course that's also extended to our neighbours, not just those in the flock already. I pray that open hearts and hands to those in need, rather than closed ones, may inform our choices in the forthcoming election.

Secondly, it's known that if sheep fall on their backs, they generally can't get back up again. They need the shepherd to rescue them, just as we need God. The relationship of trust that he calls us into is one where we acknowledge our need of him. One in which we can express our deepest longings, our griefs and even our

anger to him. Trusting in God means being completely real with him, secure in the knowledge that he will never, ever let us go. It is in God we find our home. As St Augustine prayed, 'Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you'.

So yes, there is much that we can learn from sheep - apart from munch, munch, munch – and I think much of it is about trust. I'm standing here talking to you about trust, but I'm not well qualified, except to share these few thoughts. Because, for me, learning to trust God completely and confidently has been a difficult lesson for me to learn. And I'm still learning it, because I battle with my inclination to be the one in control of my life. Ultimately, though, my experience has borne out that trusting in God *is* the safest place to be.

About four years ago I was visiting Lille in France, and went into Musee des Beaux Arts there. There's a painting there by Philippe de Champaigne which shows Jesus as the Good Shepherd, carrying a sheep on his shoulders. In the painting, Jesus isn't looking at us, the viewers – but the sheep is looking straight at us. And what we see there is not weakness, silliness, stupidity – but the confident and secure expression of one who is known, tightly held, secure - and one who entirely and without reservation, trusts the shepherd who holds him.