



**GRAY'S
INN**

May 1st 2022

Sung Eucharist in Eastertide

1 Peter 2: 9 –25 & John 10: 11-16

This Sunday, the third Sunday in our celebration of Easter, has often been called Good Shepherd Sunday. In the lessons set in the Book of Common Prayer we heard, first, from the first Letter of Peter, telling us that we were like sheep going astray, but are now returned “unto the shepherd and bishop of our souls”. And in the Gospel we heard Jesus saying that he is the Good Shepherd: unlike the hireling who will run away if danger threatens, he will stay and look after the sheep, even to the point of surrendering his own life in order to save them. And at the end of that passage, the promise that there will be one fold, one flock, one shepherd.

As so often, these words are deeply rooted in the Old Testament. In two ways. First, there is the very familiar picture of the shepherd in Psalm 23. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;

for you are with me”

The events of Holy Week, and now Easter, show above all the faithfulness of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. He stayed faithful to the commitment he made, back in the Wilderness at the beginning of his ministry, to reject the ways of this world, the pursuit of earthly power, even though that risked both success (as the world would see it) and his own life. On the Cross he takes upon himself all the pain and suffering of humanity – “My God, why have you forsaken me?” – but still, at the very end, he can trust and pray “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”.

Easter does not undo the Cross. It’s not a fairy-tale ending, a reversal of fortunes. Ours is not an escapist religion. But it does give us the confidence to say: even when I walk through the darkest valley, whether in this life, or in the “dark valley of the shadow of death”, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. “I am the good shepherd”. “The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep”.

So when Jesus speaks of himself in this way, they would have heard in the background Psalm 23. And they would have connected that to the parable which he told about the shepherd who had a hundred sheep, but when he leads them back into the sheepfold for overnight safety, he finds that one is missing. Does he say to himself, well it’s only one, the other ninety-nine are safe? No, he goes out searching for it, until he finds it and brings it home. He told three parables like that, about people being lost and then found. Religion can so often be about telling people what they should do and what will happen to them if they don’t. The Good Shepherd is the one who goes

out searching for the one who is lost, giving his all, risking his very self, to bring them back to where they belong.

But the Old Testament background to the Good Shepherd is also about something else, a second thing. For that we must go to the prophet Ezekiel. He says a lot about “the shepherds of Israel” and none of it is good. He means those who have responsibility for the political and religious life of the nation, those to whom God has given authority over the people. And he castigates them for their self-seeking and their abuse of power

“You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd”

But no longer, says Ezekiel. God will come and take away their power, and he himself will care for the sheep. “I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice”.

It sounds like some kind of theocracy, however it might take shape in practice, and doesn't fit with our modern understanding of government.

But surely it does have something to say to our world today and the issues confronting us.

The easiest application is to Putin and his abuse of power, at home and most violently in the Ukraine. Nothing can excuse it, but alongside our outrage there might also be greater awareness of the dangers created by all kinds of nationalism and imperialism. And also a renewed commitment by all countries to international law.

But it also comes closer to home. Here on Easter Sunday Archbishop Justin used his Canterbury sermon to criticise those who have power – “the shepherds” - in our own country, especially over their plan to process asylum seekers by sending them to Rwanda. Other Christian leaders took up the cause of the poorest people in our society, hardest hit by the cost of living crisis. And just this past week the Church of England has published a report calling for a long-term strategy to address the alarming rise in child poverty.

Justin Welby got a lot of flack from some politicians and sections of the media. Was Thomas Beckett, looking down on us from the East window, reminded of the foreboding “Who will rid us of this troublesome priest?” Welby was caught in the usual Catch 22 situation. If Christian leaders only espouse broad principles they are told: well that’s all very nice but some of us have to live in the real world and address real issues. But when they do apply Christian beliefs to actual problems, they are told to keep out of politics. When Desmond Tutu was accused like that he used to respond to by asking “Which Bible are you reading?”

So this morning, as we come to share in this Eucharist, we meet the shepherd who feeds his sheep. And as we leave this Eucharist, we cannot ignore what “the shepherds of Israel” are doing today.