

Easter 4 Sunday 22nd April
Acts 4:5-12; 1 John 3: 16-24 ; John 10:11-18

“ I am the Good Shepherd”

Words said by the Lord Jesus in the opening verse of this mornings Gospel passage.
Very familiar words

Jesus describing Himself as the Good Shepherd
But before we look a little closer at these words I wonder if I could first of all ask a question:

What is it that a shepherd actually does?
Now I realise that sounds a bit of a daft question.
I mean, everyone knows that a shepherd's supposed to look after sheep , yes ?
But of course there are shepherds and there are shepherds with different ways and means.

I'm guessing some of you here today ,people of a “ certain age” (like myself) may well remember watching the TV programme “ One Man And His Dog”
A kind of competition involving different shepherds from right across the country who would demonstrate their skills at being able to move small groups of sheep round obstacles and into pens or enclosures. They'd do this of course with the help of a dog , (hence the name) , sometimes with two or three dogs who they'd direct with a mixture of whistles and shouts ,(amazing to watch ! Clearly a very skilled sort of job. No question about it)

It was all about communication between shepherd and dog
They'd be working as a team.
And of course the ones who performed the best , in the quickest time won the prize.
Now when we read about shepherds in the Bible we discover a whole different way of doing things

While the British or Western shepherds would rely on the relationship they had built up with the sheepdog to get the sheep to go where they needed to go, the Judaeian shepherd actually had a relationship with the sheep themselves who would trust him and who would follow him (or her) when the shepherd called to them (sometimes they'd play a musical instrument like a flute as well)

From what I hear , even today, shepherds in the Holy Land use these same time honoured methods of tending sheep.

Shepherd and Sheep : A relationship of trust and mutuality.
Now with this image in mind , we need to remember that the Old Testament in particular is peppered with descriptions of God as being a Shepherd to His people Israel

The 23rd Psalm of course is certainly the most best known and most well loved, but there are many others as well

“ Then we , your people, will always thank you. We are like sheep with you as our shepherd and all generations will hear us praise you “ (Psalm 79:13)

As a Middle Eastern shepherd leads his flock to good pasture , fresh water and places of safety , so God leads His people : The people who follow Him and seek to obey His commands .

Thing about sheep is , well they're not very bright are they?
They have a tendency to wander off and get themselves into all kinds of trouble.
And if we're honest , aren't you and I a bit like that as well ?
We know deep down where we're meant to be heading and what it is we're supposed to

be doing ;but it is so easy to be distracted and become side tracked : We listen to the wrong voices , take a few wrong turns and before we know it we're headed in the wrong direction entirely.

Don't know about you , but I've sometimes thought that it would be much more simple ,more easy to follow if God were more like a Western Shepherd : The moment a sheep starts a-wandering he brings it to heel sharpish!

But of course God isn't like that.

He isn't going to set the dogs on us!

See unlike sheep we each have Free Will , and that's a God given gift;something God Himself respects and treasures.

He wants each of us (nay He longs for each of us) to follow Him willingly and not under duress.

Perhaps the most well known Bible passage on the subject of wayward sheep is to be found in Isaiah 53

“ O we like sheep have gone astray , we have all turned to our own way” (Isaiah 53:6)

How God resolved this dilemma: How He managed to reach out and bring home a people seemingly bent on their own willful self destruction I'll return to in a little while.

Let's remain with the Shepherd image for a little longer.

Now as we' ve seen while throughout the Old Testament the relationship between God and His people Israel is frequently likened to that of a shepherd and his flock, the same is true (to a lesser extent) for leaders of Israel as well.

As we see in this passage when the recently anointed King David is finally accepted by the Northern tribes of Israel ; The tribal elders saying to David

“ The LORD said to you : It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel” (2 Samuel 5:3)

And a couple of chapters later , as the prophet Nathan relates a message from God to David , we have these words :

“ Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel , did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel?” (2 Samuel 7:7)

Interestingly, the word “Shepherd” here is being used as a verb : A “ doing word “ : Leaders are being called to Shepherd their people: Protect them , look out for them , keep them safe from danger.

It's not that they in any way “ own “ the people because they don't .The people belong to God. In a real sense they're meant to be acting on God's behalf: Performing Shepherding duties on behalf of The Good Shepherd .

And that responsibility would apply to both spiritual and secular leaders .

Of course predictably they weren't always up to the mark.

In the writings of both Jeremiah and Ezekiel (a much later period) we hear quite stern words of rebuke concerning leaders whose “ shepherding skills” left a lot to be desired.

“ Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! Says the Lord “ (Jeremiah 23:1)

And again , over in Ezekiel :

“ You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured you have not brought back the strayed you have not sought the lost,but with force and harshness you have ruled them “ (Ezekiel 34:4)

That's pretty severe isn't it?

Some serious abuse of power going on there by the sound of things.

Which brings me to the Reading from the Book of Acts we heard read a short time ago.

I have to admit, Acts of the Apostles has always been one of my favourite books of the Bible : There's so much happening. It's all such an incredible adventure.

In the previous chapter , we hear how Peter and John while on their way to the Temple have put into practice the promise which Jesus had made to them on the night before He died:

“ Very truly I tell you , the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and in fact will do even greater works than these , because I am going to the Father”

(John 14:12)

Peter and John had seen this guy who'd been crippled from birth , begging at one of the Temple gates, (basically the only source of income he could hope for) Instead of passing him by or simply tossing him a few coins Peter had uttered those immortal words:

“ I have no silver or gold but what I have I give you;
in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth stand up and walk” (Acts 3:6)

Which is exactly what the man did!

Not only standing but leaping and dancing as well ; he was overjoyed . Filled with thankfulness , as was everyone else in the vicinity; Utterly amazed at what they'd just witnessed

Well, not quite everyone: The Temple authorities weren't impressed , taking a very dim view of Peter's explanation as to what had just taken place : The healing being performed in the power of Jesus' name.

So the two disciples are arrested and locked up overnight to face an interrogation the next day before the Ruling Council.

As we heard read , as the cross examination begins I rather think Peter “ hits the nail on the head” when he asks this:

“ Rulers of the people and elders if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed”

(Acts 4:8-9)

In other words “ Let's get this right, we haven't committed any crime here. Far from it. If you guys did your job right as true Shepherds of the people you'd be celebrating this healing just as everyone else is!”

And that's the point isn't it?

They're letting themselves get hung up on a technicality: Sure a miracle may have happened, but it wasn't an authorised one. They hadn't asked permission first.

They hadn't used the right words. It wasn't official.

And so the authorities weren't happy.

It's the kind of opposition Jesus Himself encountered continually. Particularly when He did things like healing people on the Sabbath, which the authorities objected to most strongly.

Leading Jesus to make one of His most incisive comments about their insistence on “ Straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel” : In other words :Putting all their effort and energies into making sure the most trivial rules and regulations were being kept yet at the same time totally overlooking the most crucial ones , which as we heard summed up so beautifully in the other New Testament passage we heard read :

“ Little children , let us love not in words or speech , but in truth and action” (1 John 3:18)

Which pretty much sums it all up doesn't it ?

As Paul most famously wrote:

“ If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal”

(1 Corinthians 13:1)

“ What's love got to do with it ? “ (So sang Tina Turner)

Absolutely everything!

Which brings us back to our Gospel passage and the greatest ever act of sacrificial love in history

Again some words said by the Lord Jesus :

“ I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for His Sheep” (John 10:11)

Jesus drew inspiration from those Judaeen shepherds so familiar to the people among whom He taught and ministered : People who braved all kinds of dangers including bears,wolves and armed thugs,in order to protect the sheep in their care; literally risking life and limb especially on those occasions when the odd sheep decided to go AWOL and they had to search high and low deep into the mountains probably at night time and during a storm in order to bring it back to safety.

I always think its a bit ironic how , at the time of Jesus' ministry , shepherds were actually “ looked down upon” by polite society; being regarded as “ not the kind of people you really ought to hang out with”. I think its mainly because the nature and demands of their job meant they weren't usually able to follow all the strict religious rules and protocols.

Yet it's also interesting that on the night the Lord Jesus was born , it was a bunch of shepherds who received that invitation from the angels.

An example of God reaching out and embracing the most marginalised in society?

Yet also a sign of things to come: Humble Judaeen shepherds witnessing the birth of the Good Shepherd.

And as those tough working class fellows were willing to put their lives on the line for those ridiculous sheep who stupidly put themselves in harms way over and over again, so the Lord Jesus gave His All by willingly going to the Cross in order to bring each and every one of us back into a relationship with the Father.

As the hymnwriter puts it

“ We may not know we cannot tell
What pains He had to bear
But we believe it was for us
He hung and suffered there”

It is , at the end of the day, a mystery.

We'll never fully grasp what it meant; what it cost for the Lord Jesus , as He trailed into the darkest of places ; as He endured the unendurable; as He suffered the most brutal of deaths: Not for any crime He'd ever committed or even contemplated, but in some incredible way to save each and every one of us . Or to quote Isaiah once more:

“ But He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities upon Him was the punishment that made us whole , and by His bruises we are healed”

(Isaiah 53:5)

Mind blowing!

And incredibly humbling!

To know that we are loved to such an extent by the greatest most loving Being in the universe!

How do we respond ?

Well, again the answer's there in John's letter:

“ We know love by this that He laid down His life for us
and we ought to lay down our lives for one another”
(1 John 3:16)

What does that mean?

We're each of us called to share the Love of God with those around us – by our words , by our attitudes , by our actions the things we do.

Yeah?

Thing is, it's so easy to let the world , the media mould how we react to situations and the people around us .

Jesus reached out to those in need.

He always did.

He reaches out to you and me.

I believe that as we in turn reach out in love to those around us , we'll deepen our understanding, our awareness of His Love.

And by so doing we will ourselves become shepherds

Following in the footsteps of

The Good Shepherd

Amen