

## **Sermon for 8<sup>th</sup> May 2022, Year C, Easter 4**

**Preached at All Saints Biddenden and St Michael Smarden**

**Psalm 23; John 10:22-30**

### **Sermon**

There is a lot of mention of sheep and lambs and shepherds in our readings this week. The book of Revelation speaks of the Lamb at the centre of the throne of God, how he will be the shepherd of God's people, guiding us to springs of the water of life. The reading from John's gospel has Jesus declaring that same promise in person, insisting that his sheep will never perish and cannot be snatched from his hand. Even the psalm set for today – Psalm 23 – probably the most famous psalm of all, has the writer declaring that God is his shepherd, and therefore he shall not want, he will lie down in green pastures, his soul shall be restored, he will fear to no evil, he will be comforted, he will be safe and content even when he is surrounded by those who hate him, his cup will overflow, goodness and mercy will follow him, and all these blessings will go on and on, his whole life long. A very happy sheep indeed!

Clearly, the idea of God as Shepherd and his people as deeply cared-for sheep is a central idea in the biblical tradition. So perhaps it is not surprising that when Jesus co-opts the metaphor to describe himself, and then excludes the Jewish leaders from his flock, it causes great offence.

If you read the whole of chapter 10 of John's gospel, there are twenty-one verses full of sheep metaphors before we even get to today's reading. Jesus declares he is the gate for the sheep, and that he is the good shepherd, and that he lays down his life for the sheep. It is for this reason he says that he and the Father are one – because they share the same purpose, and do the same work.

Despite Jesus' provocative language, The Jewish leaders are not universal in taking offence. While some think he's possessed by a demon, others point to the good works that he does and the words he speaks, and they argue that "these are not the words of a demon-possessed man". Here in Jerusalem, they are still not quite sure what to make of this strange itinerant rabbi and miracle-worker from up north in rustic Galilee.

And so, we come to the short passage we read today. The context is the festival of Dedication which takes place in winter. This 8-day festival commemorated the rededication of the Jewish Temple in 164BC by the Maccabees, after its desecration by Antiochus IV, a Greek Syrian king who had persecuted the traditional Jews of Samaria and Judea and who had erected a statue of Zeus in the Jewish temple. The feast is still celebrated today, known by the Hebrew word for dedication, 'Hanukkah'.

Perhaps this context begins to help us understand why Jesus' claim to be the Messiah might cause so much confusion and outrage among the Jews on that particular day in the temple in Jerusalem. Was Jesus intending to lead an armed uprising against the Roman oppressors, like the Maccabees had done against Antiochus 200 years earlier? If so, shouldn't he say so plainly?

It's unclear what, exactly, the people were hoping to hear. Some probably wanted to support such an uprising, others perhaps were hoping Jesus would incriminate himself, so that they could have an unambiguous basis for attacking him.

If you're starting to feel that this all sounds very convoluted and political, that's probably because it was. But of course, Jesus has another mission in mind entirely. He says to the Jewish leaders that he has already clearly identified himself as the messiah, but that they haven't believed, because they're not his sheep. In other words, they've entirely misunderstood what 'messiah' means. They think of it as a military or kingly role, but Jesus has never laid claim to

grandiose titles. Unlike kings and princes and high priests, whose power comes from their role, Jesus demonstrates what he is about by doing humble good works. His sheep are those who have experienced those good works and have come to believe and trust in him.

The really important thing to realise, I think, is the big difference between arguing intellectually about Jesus, and experiencing his care and compassion. The sheep that belong to Jesus have not become part of his flock because they've gone through a rational, intellectual discernment, but because they discovered what it felt like to be loved.

It is the same way that a child learns to trust his or her parents – not because of reason and rational argument, but because of an experience of the heart. As Jesus also said elsewhere, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it”.

This is why as a priest I see my role not as someone trying to convince you of the truth of creeds or dogmas and doctrines, but helping you discover an authentic experience of God for yourself, something that is entirely beyond anyone's ability to describe or understand.

The Indian Jesuit priest Anthony DeMello once told a parable called “The Explorer” which tries to explain the differences between a head and heart understanding of Jesus. In his story, a person leaves his home village to explore the faraway and exotic Amazon. When he returns, the villagers are captivated as the explorer tries to describe his many experiences, along with the incredible beauty of the place, with its thundering waterfalls, beautiful foliage, and extraordinary wildlife. He struggles to put into words though, the feelings that flooded his heart when he heard the night sounds of the forest or battled the dangers of the rapids or gazed up at the sky through the canopies of mighty trees. So, he tells them they must go to the Amazon and experience it for themselves.

To help them on their journey, the explorer draws a map in tremendous detail. The villagers are delighted. Immediately, they copy the map, so that everyone can have their own version. They frame the map for their town hall and their homes. Regularly, they come together to study the map and to discuss it, until the villagers all consider themselves experts on the Amazon – for do they not know the location of every waterfall and rapids, every turn and bend, every poisonous creature and source of food?

There is a tendency for preachers and evangelists to try to answer every question, to explain every creed and context, in short, to draw endlessly detailed maps of the landscape of God; but a map is not the reality, any more than a photograph can capture the total experience of being in a place. You can know every fact about a person, but to experience what it feels like to love them and be loved by them is another thing entirely.

Our task then, is to encourage and inspire each other to seek out the Good Shepherd for ourselves. As the sheep of God's pasture, we are never going to be able to fully understand the Shepherd, but we can come to know what it feels like to trust him, and to know that he is faithful and will never lose us. After all, it is not superior knowledge that transforms us and makes us Christlike, but believing with the simple trust of a child, or a sheep, that God's overflowing love and mercy is always closer to us than our own breath.