

St Francis & St Mary's Holy Communion 7th May 2017

4th Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:42-47

1 Peter 2:19-25 John 10:1-10

this is a favourite Sunday for many people – especially if you're planning for Sunday School or Toddlers' Service – a day when we think about Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and ourselves as his sheep; there are lovely pictures to show, and nice stories to tell, all the comforting associations and familiar hymns that go with this theme

another favourite is the psalm set for today, Psalm 23, 'the Lord's my shepherd'; it's often read or sung at funerals, or at the bedside of those near the end of life, and it is found very comforting, of course

as we look through this psalm, we can see there the themes of *provision*, 'the Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want'; of *protection*, 'yea, though I walk through death's dark vale, yet will I fear no ill'; and of *presence*, 'in God's house for evermore my dwelling place shall be' – and there's a neat, reassuring sermon outline: three points all beginning with the letter 'p'! it's all very familiar, very comforting

but I want to burst that comfortable bubble a little today, because actually there is more of an 'edge' to this imagery of sheep and shepherd than we may think; the 'abundant life' that Jesus promises his sheep in our gospel reading may not mean simply a life of ease and security

let's work through this psalm, in parallel with the reading from John 10, and see what the deeper message may be here:

in Old Testament times, kings were often pictured as 'shepherds' of their people, and that is not only amongst the Jews; for instance, my Study Bible has an illustration of Pharaoh Amunhotep of Egypt, carrying a shepherd's crook as a sign of his royal status

King David, the supposed author of Psalm 23, had been a shepherd, literally taking care of animals; when he was made king, he then became 'shepherd' to his people; so when he writes, 'the Lord is my shepherd', David is connecting with that image of royal authority

so, first, *the shepherd has authority over the sheep*: when we think of Jesus as our shepherd, do we see him as having authority over us? or do we rather think of him as our cosy friend, who will look out for us and get us out of tricky situations, as in the parable of the lost sheep?

in John 10, the shepherd arrives at the gate of the sheepfold; he is recognised by the gate-keeper, who opens up for him; he calls his sheep, they hear and know his voice and they obey it

so our first challenge is: to hear Jesus' voice and obey it, to do what he says; that's pretty basic, but without that willingness to hear and obey the shepherd, we've not really got started on being his sheep!

Juliet tells the story of a step of faith she made in her 20s like this: until that point she was in the 'driving seat' of her life, with Jesus as a passenger beside her; but then she invited him to take over the driving, to be in control of her life; and that's something we all need to do, to allow Jesus to have authority over us, and to 'steer' the course of our lives; and that brings us to ...

second, *the shepherd leads the sheep*: when we obey Jesus' authority, there is somewhere to go; Psalm 23 talks of being led to 'green pastures' and 'quiet waters'; in John 10 Jesus says the sheep 'will come in and go out and find pasture'; but these are only resting points on a greater journey; having 'life abundantly' means more than just having more and better grass to eat and water to drink

in this country we probably picture a flock of sheep in an enclosed field, full of lush grass; the sheep can stay there all day, and need hardly move to keep eating; but in the Middle East the flock has to be continually on the move, seeking out fresh food and drink, guided by the shepherd

Jesus says of the shepherd, 'when he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them and the sheep follow him'

do we see Jesus as taking us somewhere, as moving us on to new things, or as allowing us to stand still, to stay where we are? Psalm 23 speaks of being led 'in paths of righteousness'; that could mean being taken somewhere we might prefer not to go!

being a sheep in Jesus' flock is not a static but a dynamic relationship, it involves movement and change; that's what the first disciples discovered on the day of Pentecost, that we have been reading about in Acts; great changes are afoot, and there are more challenges to come; this moment of calm, where the disciples are all together and have all things common, and have favour with all the people, does not last long – dark clouds are soon on the horizon

and that brings us to the third point:

third, *the shepherd shares in the suffering of his sheep*: 'abundant life' comes at a price; the 'paths of righteousness' can lead into some dark places, what our hymn calls 'death's dark vale', or more literally 'the valley of the shadow of death'

this is not only about the approach of death itself, important though that is; it is about all our places of hardship and suffering; as we follow the shepherd, we don't avoid these dark places, we're not spared the hard times, but we are assured of his constant presence with us: 'for thou art with me, and thy rod and staff me comfort still'

what are the 'dark valleys' for us? what causes us anxiety, depression, panic, even despair, at times? perhaps things we've experienced in the past? or that we're going through at present? or that we dread for the future? do we see Jesus there with us too, or do we suspect that he may have abandoned us? do we understand that these 'dark valleys' are a necessary part of our maturing and growing as human beings and disciples of Christ, of our being formed into his likeness?

reading on in John 10, we begin to grasp the full implications of this; for Jesus then says, 'I am the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep'; so we discover that the shepherd is not immune to suffering; he is willing to endure it for the sake of his flock, indeed it is a necessary step on his way to glory

that thought is picked up in today's verses from 1 Peter 2, where Peter writes that 'Christ suffered for you; he bore your sins in his body on the cross; by his wounds you have been healed' – the Shepherd suffers for his sheep; but it doesn't stop there, for Peter goes on, Christ was 'leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps', and that 'free from sin, we might live for righteousness'

so he calls on these Christians to endure, to hold on through their suffering, knowing that they're walking in Christ's steps, and it is there that there they will truly find God's blessing

do we see Jesus taking us into the dark places? are we prepared to follow him, even into the 'the valley of the shadow of death'? do we trust him to keep us even there, or would we rather play safe and avoid the hardships and struggles, and doing so, miss the opportunity for growth and maturity?

we live in a culture that regards all suffering and trouble as some kind of 'mistake', where we will always be looking for someone to blame, or for some way to 'fix' it; when we accept these things from God, they become the means of his grace for us

will we deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him, and *there* discover the abundant life that Jesus promises?

Jesus is a faithful shepherd, a good shepherd; we need to be faithful and good sheep, who will obey his authority, follow his leading, embrace the struggle, and grow in trust through suffering

being one of Jesus' sheep is not an easy, comfortable life, but it is a good life, an abundant life, as we return again and again to 'the shepherd and guardian of our souls'