

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 7 May 2017 – Easter 4 (Year A)
Acts 2.42-27; Psalm 23; I Peter 2.19-25; John 10.1-10

The world beyond the walls

It's one of the sights of spring many of us look forward to: flocks of sheep with their lambs frolicking in green fields, full of the joys of new life and mother's milk. I'm sorry if they're not your thing, because you can't get away from them even in the Bible. They roam all over its pages, from Abel, a keeper of sheep in Genesis 4 who was murdered by his brother Cain, to the sheep for sale in the markets of the great city of Babylon, the destruction of which is announced in Revelation 18. Sometimes the language of the Bible seems strange to us, which is hardly surprising, given that it comes to us from so long ago, but we ought at least to feel at home when it talks about sheep, because sheep-rearing has been a central part of the economy of our islands for a very long time. We have hardy sheep who roam the Lakeland fells and Welsh mountains, and valley sheep who grow fat on the lush grass; island sheep which have learnt to feed on seaweed on North Ronaldsay in Orkney; and those wonderfully eager and intelligent sheepdogs who round them up when it's time to be moved. I don't know about you, but when I'm held up on country roads by farmers moving their flocks I don't feel frustrated by the delay, I have to smile and enjoy the sight. We take sheep for granted now, but they give us wool and milk and meat and they brought great wealth to parts of the country: you only have to go to the Cotswolds or East Anglia to see the great churches built by rich wool merchants in places like Northleach and Long Melford. And all that from a creature which has the reputation for being rather timid and foolish.

Sheep-rearing was a mainstay of the local economy in the hill country of central Palestine, which is why the animals were often used as pictures of the relationship between humans and God. The best-loved psalm in the English-speaking world does just that: the Lord is my shepherd. That relationship has many different sides to it. All we like sheep have gone astray. Led like a lamb to the slaughter. And that's just Isaiah 53. Left to their own devices sheep are vulnerable to diseases, to hurting themselves in rocky terrain and to being preyed on by wild animals. So they need

shepherds, whose job is to protect the flock from danger, gather it in at night, and lead it to the best pasture by day.

In his teaching, Jesus doesn't use academic or technical language to dazzle his hearers. He speaks from scenes and situations which are part of their everyday lives. How he would adapt to the complexities of twenty-first century life is anyone's guess. Could the Lord be my personal trainer, supposing I have one? Or my smart phone, without which I feel completely lost? Maybe not. But shepherds feature in two of his best-known parables. They divide the sheep from the goats into their separate pens in Matthew 25, as they still do in biblical lands at the end of the day. And they go searching for the one lost sheep, leaving the rest behind, because each animal is precious. When Jesus speaks of himself as the good shepherd who keeps his flock safe at night in John 10 the picture in our minds is probably that of the sheepfolds we see dotted all over the country – a stone wall with a gate in it, where the animals can be penned. But that's not how it was in Palestine, and the parable only works if we are alive to that. In the evening or before a storm the sheep would be brought into the walled courtyard of a house. The courtyard had a door on to the street, guarded by a door-keeper who opened it in the morning when the shepherd came to take the flock to pasture. Unlike European shepherds, who drive the sheep from behind, Palestinian shepherds usually walked in front of their flocks and had special calls to which they can respond. They know each sheep by name. That's not so far-fetched. Our own shepherds have calls which tell their sheepdogs what to do, and I have a colleague who worked as a shepherd for some time in his young days. He gave each member of the flock the name of a classical god or goddess, and he assures me that he was able to identify each of them. The thief who breaks into the Palestinian sheepfold is someone who climbs over the wall into the courtyard and opens the door from the inside. The sheep rush out, frightened. He won't get them all; they won't follow him, because they don't recognize his sound; but he'll be happy as long as he bags one or two animals for their wool and meat.

Those who heard this parable would have known all these things. But, John tells us, it was a figure of speech and because they didn't latch on to that Jesus has to explain what he means. But what exactly it is a figure of? Though we tend to focus on his

words 'I am the good shepherd', the first explanation he gives is that he is the gate, which sounds odd. Gates and doors mark the boundaries which separate two distinct spaces, a public space like the street from a private one like your home, or a room with one function from another. But this isn't any old gate: it's the one which lets the sheep in to rest safely at night and out to find good pasture by day. So the picture Jesus draws is one of movement, of coming in to rest and going out to feed.

Sometimes churches give the impression that all they're interested in is keeping people inside, where they will learn what to believe and how to behave. That doesn't seem to be the way of Jesus. There are times when we need his protection – his wisdom, his compassion: when we are drifting, when we are bruised. But there are other times when we need the right kind of nourishment if we are to grow strong and healthy. There's no grass in the courtyard: the sheep must leave their place of safety and face the risks if they are to feed; but they have a shepherd to lead them to the richest pasture.

So it's a dynamic picture, a constant process of return to the centre and of being led out to explore the world beyond the walls. We might think that the best pasture is to be found when we are safe inside, listening to the words of Jesus and resting in his presence. But this parable suggests something different. The world beyond the walls offers many versions of what is claimed to be the good life and many would-be shepherds offering tasty morsels, and they will usually disappoint. You don't flourish as a person by trying to impress others by your achievements or your possessions; not for more than a little while, anyway, because sooner or later you will discover that you can have everything your heart ever desired and still be unhappy, still feel empty.

Here's a modern version of Psalm 23 by an American writer called Max Lucado:

I am my own shepherd. I am always in need.

I stumble from mall to mall and shrink to shrink, seeking relief but never finding it.

I creep through the valley of the shadow of death and fall apart.

I fear everything from pesticides to power lines, and I'm starting to act like my mother.

I go down to the weekly staff meeting and am surrounded by enemies. I go home, and even my goldfish scowls at me.

I anoint my headache with extra-strength paracetamol.

My Jack Daniels runneth over.

Surely misery and misfortune will follow me, and I will live in self-doubt for the rest of my lonely life.

A bit extreme, maybe, but you get the point. In the original ‘The Lord is my shepherd’ is followed by the words ‘I shall not want’. There’s a relationship between the two parts of the sentence: my needs are met because the Lord is my shepherd. Alas, so easy to say, so hard to accept. Why must I depend on someone else who can’t be texted and doesn’t come running when I need help? Yet if we are honest with ourselves (and that’s a good place to begin on the spiritual journey) we know that reliance on our own resources often fails us, and when they do we drift along at the mercy of events, losing our sense of purpose and direction. We turn this way and that looking for help, but none of the usual panaceas seems to work for long. Everything and everyone seems to conspire against us and we don’t even like ourselves much. I have times like that and I expect you do too. To find our way we need a good guide.

‘I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.’ That’s the voice of the Good Shepherd: the one who leads us out into the wider world and shows us where to find the food and drink to satisfy our hungry and thirsty spirits. Of course, being saved has become a religious cliché and not all of us are comfortable with language like that. But when you put it in the context of the parable it becomes something else: being safe, able to thrive; not just managing, but revelling in what it means to be alive; and doing so not to maximise one’s own pleasure at the expense of others, but as part of a community which is always looking to heal hurt, forgive wrongs, restore and build up the broken. A community which takes its lead, its inspiration, from one who understands our weakness, stands with us in our need. The Good Shepherd doesn’t order his flock about or wall them in with rules and doctrines; he leads it to where it can stand on its own feet. There will come a dark moment when the thieves and robbers enter the courtyard and the terrified sheep flee – the Cross; and then a new dawn when a few frightened followers discover that he is still leading them on - resurrection.

If that is the pattern, then churches are not to be scared of leaving the safety of the walled compound. They are called to be communities out and about in the world, learning from their shepherd how to distinguish appearance from reality, lasting values from immediate kicks, words of false comfort and hope from words which bring life. The Good Shepherd isn’t their private possession; he has given his life and

been raised from the dead for the sake of the whole human race. His people follow where he leads them through all the times and places they inhabit, and they offer practical help to those who have lost their way, through their own fault or through the actions of others, so that they can live in freedom and peace. That surely, is what Jesus means when he says that he has come so that people may have life, and have it abundantly. Not a life lived in fear and famine. Not one lived in the shadow of war and destruction. Not one of selling your body in order to live or of seeking temporary relief from misery in sex or drugs or drink. Nor of trusting your life to traffickers in an overcrowded boat in a stormy sea because the risks outweigh staying at home, where bombs rain down and people tremble in basements. Those are not the pastures of abundant living; there the grass is thin and shrivelled and the sheep grow sick and die. Those and many others are the places where the thieves and robbers of the parable dump the sheep when they've taken their profits, caring nothing for them.

'I am the gate.' And here's the truly surprising thing. When we follow the Good Shepherd's lead the sheep themselves begin to turn into shepherds, joining him in his quest to seek the lost, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak. So perhaps the picture I began with, of lambs frolicking in the fields, isn't that far from the truth. God has no desire to create a class of slaves who serve him out of fear and mouth the right words in case he takes offence. When we look at the world outside these walls through the eyes of his Son, our Good Shepherd, and follow where he leads us, every broken life becomes a lost sheep, worth infinite trouble to seek out, bring to safety, and set free.