

Sermon on John 10: 11-18

by Gill Barrett

Today's gospel reading begins with verse 11 in chapter 10 of John's gospel: Jesus' statement, "I am the good shepherd."

We don't really meet many shepherds these days unless we live in a farming community. Our experience of sheep is generally related to their products: a shoulder of lamb or a nice woolly jumper. Some of you may have more direct experience of sheep by having family members who have been farmers. This is certainly my case: I can remember staying on my uncle's farm at lambing time and being taken to see the new-born lambs in their field at night, with a flashlight to guide us. It made a deep impression on me. As a child I would play with the lambs. Did you know that young lambs will imitate your actions? If you run and jump, they run and jump in exactly the same way and in the same place. I hasten to add I was quite young when I tried all this.

What does a shepherd do? He leads the sheep to find good pasture and guards them from danger. He ensures that they have food to eat and a place of safety in which to sleep.

There is a difference between a good shepherd and someone who is merely paid to look after the sheep. As the gospel reading makes clear: the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, whereas the hired hand, who does not own the sheep, does not look after them when danger threatens. He sees the wolf coming, leaves the sheep and runs away, so that the wolf is free to attack.

At night, the good shepherd, would lie across the entrance to the sheepfold to protect them from danger and would stay close to them, to guard them, during the day, when they were outside the fold.

Often, a flock would consist of sheep and goats, who both look very similar, unlike our native sheep and goats, the difference being sheep have wool and goats have hair. Goats never sleep inside the fold, they stay outside at night. Sheep and goats are easy to separate at night but really difficult at daytime.

At the beginning of the gospel passage Jesus say, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

In the 23rd Psalm we read about the divine shepherd. '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; ..."

This is a psalm of trust in the divine shepherd, leading his people in the Exodus through danger to security. In Biblical terms the word 'shepherd' is a metaphor for royalty. The rod and staff represent a shepherd's rod used to guide God's people through dangerous terrain.

In the gospel reading today we see Jesus as the good shepherd, who knows his own sheep as they also know him. "Shepherds called their sheep out of the fold by their names and the flock followed their voice."

The Greek word for church, *ecclesia*, literally means 'called out' from which we get our term 'ecclesiastical.' We are 'called out' by God, by name, and Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows each one of us as an individual; we are part of his universal flock.

Yes, most of us do not live or work in a pastoral society. Nevertheless, this passage is speaking directly to us, particularly in the difficult times we are currently living through.

Today, we are like sheep that seek guidance. We are vulnerable, as we have found during the past year, when our daily lives have been ordered and changed in ways that we never dreamt of. We are trusting that we can be led out of our present crisis through the action of scientists, doctors and politicians but we are in God's hands.

The wolf in our midst is the desire to get back to normal, as soon as possible. To bend the rules to fit our own desires and needs. Rather than thinking of the effect this would have on others we imagine that bending is not the same as breaking.

Yet throughout the pandemic we have had and continue to have the guidance of the good shepherd. A shepherd that protects us; that leads and revives us and is our ever-present companion: who is always ready to listen to our prayers. So that we too, can echo what the psalmist wrote:

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Amen