

The Good Shepherd ...

... calls you by name to have life in abundance

A reflection given on Fourth Sunday of Easter 3rd May 2020, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Online Service

John 10:1-10

Although Beverley Minster is closed and most of our staff are on furlough, the sanctuary project is continuing: the scaffolding continues to rise up the outside of the lesser south transept. Part of that project has been the appointment of a Learning and Engagement Officer and about a month ago, Ali Bodley started that role in circumstances probably very different from what she would have expected when she applied. Nothing daunted, Ali has found plenty to do and one of the first things has been to put out a little online survey asking people what three words they would associate with the idea of sanctuary.

The responses included many of the words you might expect: the biggest word group was safety and safe; along with words like peace, protection, shelter. But there were also some more negative words, words like fear, sadness and loneliness, which remind us that the idea of sanctuary only makes sense against a background of danger and wrongdoing, and a world that isn't always comfortable or even safe.

And the dominant image in this morning's reading is that of the sheepfold, which I guess is a kind of sanctuary for sheep. The shepherd is the one who guards the way in to the sheepfold and make sure the sheep in his flock can get in and the thieves and the bandits are kept out. The sheep live in a dangerous world full of risk, where they may be vulnerable to those who want to exploit them, where they may fall victim to those who are stronger and more powerful, where they need protecting and guiding, where they have to work out who they can really trust: which is the voice that the shepherd whom they can trust and which is the voice of the stranger whom they can't.

The Good Shepherd wants his sheep to be saved, and to find true sanctuary to be able to come in and go out and find pasture. If the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy, the Good Shepherd comes in order that his flock may have life and have it in abundance. And that is surely closer to what we mean when we say we

want Beverley Minster to be a sanctuary: not so much a place where people can play at religion or even a place where they can escape from the world; but a place and a community where we can have life, and have it abundantly.

This time of lockdown and self-isolation is incredibly difficult for most people: for those who are stuck on their own, for example, deprived of all company; for those who have been made redundant or lost their livelihood; for those who are cooped up with those they would rather not be with and who may even be at risk of violence or abuse; and of course, we're all at risk of getting ill.

But for some, even in the midst of these very real challenges, there may be an opportunity to seek sanctuary and to see things from the perspective of the sheepfold. When the normal routines are broken up and our various patterns of self-sufficiency and our habits for managing daily life get disrupted, and we see how fragile they are: at such times, we may be forced to think again about whether the way we're living is making us more alive or simply keeping us half dead. At a time like this, we're given some distance from the way we normally live and may have some space to consider whether we've got our priorities right, or whether we're just listening to the wrong voices.

Maybe our busyness and our focus on our careers or on being noticed by the world, is stopping us from hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd and from allowing ourselves to be known by him. Of course, he knows us anyway - but do we know that we are known by him? Have we become bundles of distractedness, listening to the superficial voice of any stranger who will divert us, so long as we don't have to listen to the one who knows us as we are; who strips away our fantasies and our false sense of self; whom we stand before in all our excruciating fear and nakedness; but who still loves us and invites us to make our home in the safety of his sheepfold.

Holy Communion always involves an invitation to draw near and to receive. We may not be able to share in the 'one bread' and the 'one cup' today, but we're still invited into deeper communion with the Good Shepherd: he calls you by name because he knows you, and he knows you as you truly are. He calls you because he wants to lead you to a good pasture; to find a sanctuary where you can be set free from all the falsehoods and deceptions of the world. Where you can truly have life and have it in abundance.

Reading Texts

John 10:1-10

¹"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷ So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.