

The Good Shepherd

... *Who are you following?*

A sermon given on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, 8th May 2022 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Psalm 23; John 10:22-30

"The Lord is my shepherd."

The 23rd Psalm, which we had as our first reading this morning, is saying something about leadership, or more precisely, it's asking, "Who are you following?" In the Bible, the shepherd is a metaphor for leadership: the shepherds of Israel were her Kings and the greatest King David, started out as a shepherd boy; shepherds are responsible for feeding their sheep; for guiding them to fresh pasture; and protecting them from predators. And in the ancient world, as in many parts of the world today, shepherds lead and the sheep follow, rather than the way we do it now in the west, with the shepherds sitting at the back and letting their dogs do all the work. So in biblical times, the shepherd is a good image of leadership. Who nourishes you? Who shows you which way to go? Who protects you from the things that most endanger you.

In recent years, many people around the world have been attracted by the idea of strong leadership: Russia, China, Hungary, Turkey, even the United States, have all had leaders recently who present themselves as strong and who have enjoyed popular support as a result, even if to people in other countries, this leadership looks authoritarian and intolerant. Such strong leaders often feed people's fears: fear of immigrants; fear of gay people; fear of Jewish people; fear of the neighbour; fear of the west; fear of Islam; fear of a free press. You name it, a strong leader will stoke up fear of it as a way of bolstering their own authority - "Trust me" they say, "and I'll protect you from your worst fears."

But the Psalmist says, *"The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want."* If the Lord is our shepherd, there is no need to be anxious or afraid. If the Lord is our Shepherd, he will nourish us, guide and protect us by setting us free from our fears instead of stirring them up. Not only does He provide green pastures and still waters, but He restores my soul. If the Lord is our shepherd, our souls can be restored: we can

learn to be human again; we can find contentment; we can be set free from the desires which enslave us and eat us up with dissatisfaction and anxiety. And if the Lord is our Shepherd, He will lead us in right paths, not for His benefit, but for ours. But for that to happen, we do have to trust Him and to follow Him; we do have to learn the discipline of listening and obeying - not mindlessly, but because we know Him and we know He can be trusted. He can be trusted even when life is tough, even in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, because He stays with us - He doesn't abandon us, but goes with us, even into the darkness of death itself, so that I may fear no evil. As Jesus, the Good Shepherd, says in the Gospel reading, *"My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."*

There may be other leaders clamouring for our attention and our allegiance, but once we've responded to the calling of the Good Shepherd, the false shepherds will be unable to snatch us from out of his hand - he will hold us gently but firmly.

One of the fears which strong leadership seeks to address is the fear of scarcity: 'We haven't got enough room,' cried the Nazis under Hitler, and so they invaded Czechoslovakia; 'The west has got us boxed into a corner,' cries the Russian regime under Putin, and so they invade Ukraine. Every war of aggression is fed by fear that someone else will get a bigger slice of the cake, that someone else's advance will somehow be at our expense. And that's what creates enemies: the fear of scarcity.

But the Lord prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies. The Lord is a source of abundance, so that I don't need to be scared of my enemies getting more than me. He anoints my head with oil and my cup overflows with plenty. If my enemy is created by scarcity and competition, then the Lord turns my enemy into a fellow guest. If the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want - my cup will overflow; goodness and mercy will follow me; I don't need to feel dissatisfied or afraid, because such things are impossible in the house of the Lord where I am dwelling.

So let me ask you again, in the face of the different shepherds making all kinds of promises - political shepherds, but also big business shepherds, influencer shepherds and celebrity shepherds:-

"Who are you following?"

Which of those other shepherds clamouring for our allegiance will make us content? Or will they just make up our discontent worse? Which of them will really give us the green pastures and still waters capable of restoring our souls, of helping us to be comfortable in our own skins, of revealing to us our own true natures? Which of them will comfort and guide us even in the Valley of the Shadow of Death?

The Psalmist experienced freedom from fear and desire when he knew the Lord to be His Shepherd. And Jesus picks up the language in the New Testament, "I am the Good Shepherd" he says, *"My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."*

A colleague recently told me a story of giving an 'All-Age' talk, using 'Godly play' as a way of telling Bible stories by acting out the stories with little models. And he was telling them about the Good Shepherd using models of the sheep. And there are all sorts of different kinds of sheep. There were white sheep, black sheep, spotted sheep, even stripey sheep. And he said, "What do you think about all these different kinds of sheep?" And one of the children put up their hands and they said, "Well the sheep are all different but they are all equal (obviously been well versed in diversity training)." And my friend said, "Yes, but if they're all different, how do you know that they are equal?" And there was a long silence and everybody looked very thoughtful until one little girl put up her hand and she was only five or six and she said, "They're equal, because they're all following the same shepherd." So,

"Who are you following?"

Which voice do you know and which are you listening to? The Good Shepherd will hold on to you come what may. Listen to him; be guided by him; and as you join him at his table this morning, feast on the abundance of his goodness and mercy.