

The Good Shepherd ...

... authority through consent and self-giving service

A sermon given on the fourth Sunday of Easter, 30th April 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

John 10:1-11

Our reading this morning introduces the idea of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. And this picks up a very rich theme in the Scriptures - there are shepherds and sheep all the way through: Abel, the younger son of Adam and Eve was a shepherd, suggesting the human vocation to care for and steward the animal kingdom; Abraham, the father of the people of Israel, was himself a shepherd with extensive flocks as he travelled from Haran to the Promised Land; David was the shepherd boy who became Israel's greatest king, and in his story we see the connection with the idea that the shepherds of Israel were her kings - it's a royal title; and the prophets often criticise the kings of Israel because instead of guiding and protecting the flock, these shepherds often merely exploited their sheep and used them for their own purposes; and in reaction to that negative view of the kings as bad shepherds, the prophet Ezekiel hears the word of God promised that God Himself will come and be the shepherd of his people; the same theme we hear in Psalm 23, *'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want, He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters.'*

So the Old Testament scriptures use this image of the shepherd to make connections between the human vocation to care for the non-human creation; the identity of God's people as a nomadic people being given a home; the responsibilities of Israel's kings to protect and guide; and the nature of God himself - they're all woven together in this image of the shepherd; and not least, the Messiah of God is to be a shepherd. It's a rich figure of speech, although when Jesus uses it in the Gospel reading to describe his own ministry, we're told that the disciples didn't understand what he was saying to them.

And as I point out that the image of the shepherd is a royal image, applied both to God and to his earthly representative, I'm conscious that next Saturday we have a coronation in Westminster Abbey, a religious ceremony full of symbolism, in which an individual through no merit or action of his own, is invested with divine authority to serve his people: King Charles will be anointed with oil as a sign of the Holy Spirit; he will be presented with a sceptre as a symbol of justice tempered with mercy; he will be given an orb as a symbol of Christ's authority over all the world; and the congregation in the abbey will acclaim him as king as a sign that he governs not by force but by consent, and that his authority comes not just from above, from God, but

from below as well. And throughout the ceremony, there will be reminders that the monarch's power is qualified and not absolute - he will be accountable to God, and in many ways his authority is modelled on that of Christ.

And the particular link I want to make with the passage this morning is where Jesus says that he *'calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.'* And the sheep follow him because they know his voice. In other words, our allegiance to Christ the King is an allegiance to a person. Jesus calls us by name and we know his voice. His authority is based on trust and his purpose is that we may have life and have it abundantly through our relationship with him. So in following Christ, we are not following an ideology or an institution. Neither are we following a system or a flag or a committee. We're following a person.

And it's the same with the monarchy. When I was made vicar here, I had to swear an oath of obedience not only to Queen Elizabeth and her successors, but also to the Archbishop of York - so my allegiance is not to the State or to the Church, but to real people who represent those bigger realities. And this has the effect of qualifying and humanising the power exercised by institutions and officials: authority is given a face. And because the King's authority is modelled on that of Christ, it is the face of service and of love - *'The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'*

So those who think that monarchy has had its day and who say that King Charles's rule is not in my name, I want to say, "Be careful what you wish for", because the alternatives to our kind of monarchy will tend to be both less personal and more absolute: less personal because the alternatives tend to be bound up in a party or the state; and more absolute because the alternatives will tend to involve people seeking power rather than having it thrust upon them. And if you take God out of the picture, then there is no counterbalance to earthly power.

But Jesus, the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He comes not to be served, but to serve in order that his sheep may have life and have it more abundantly. According to the Gospel reading, Jesus the Good Shepherd also has a particular role as the gatekeeper of the sheep fold. He leads the sheep into the fold so that they can be kept safe from thieves and bandits and all those who would mislead and exploit the sheep with falsehood and wrong thinking. And he leads the sheep out into green pastures where they may be nourished by beauty, truth and goodness, and may share those things with the world.

So as we recommit ourselves to Jesus the Good Shepherd this morning, so we pray for King Charles this coming Saturday - that he might be a good shepherd to our nation and reflects to us all the values of the one who came not to be served, but to serve, and whose authority is expressed through consent and self-giving service.

Reading Text

John 10:1-11

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. ¹¹ I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.