

Easter 4

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“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. For you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

I

Our Psalm today is probably one of the best known of all the Psalms. It begins with the declaration that the Lord God is our shepherd. Because of that, we will want for nothing.

This image comes to us from the ancient Jewish people, who, for most of the Old Testament, were a nation of shepherds and pastoralists. If the Psalms were written by King David, these lines would have been written about 1,000 years before Christ, and at around the time that ancient Jewish civilization began to settle down in villages and towns. David's successor, Solomon, built the Temple in Jerusalem – which put Judaea on the map as the Kingdom of the Jews.

Sheep husbandry is a pretty consistent thread in the Bible! In Genesis, the dispute between Cain and Abel arose out of Abel's offering a sheep to God, which was better than Cain's offering of grain. Later, Abraham is commanded to sacrifice a sheep, instead of his son, Isaac. And David himself was tending to the family sheep, before going out to kill Goliath. And, of course, it was “shepherds abiding in the field” who were first invited to pay homage to the baby Jesus!

If sheep were the basis of the society, then so were shepherds. Sheep need looking after. They are perhaps good followers, but do not always follow the right leader, in the right direction!

The Israelites depended heavily on sheep for food and clothing. In those days, in that part of the world; what better proof of God's blessing than an animal that gave you milk and wool; then meat and leather? In an age when people sacrificed to God, it was often a lamb that was killed.

Christ's sacrifice has been described as the "Paschal Lamb" – the Passover sacrifice that offers us redemption!

And that "sheep and shepherd" image still pervades in our church, doesn't it? If you search for the word "sheep" in the Book of Common Prayer, you will find it 76 times! And "Lamb" occurs 35 times, and "Shepherd" 34! Just think how many images are out there, of Christ holding a lamb in his arms. There are many beautiful windows, carvings and paintings, depicting this scene. When we use the term "Pastor" – we use the Latin word for shepherd!

Our Bishops traditionally carry a crozier – or a shepherd's crook – as a sign of their office. At their ordination, Bishops are charged to: "keep watch over the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit has appointed you to shepherd the Church of God. Encourage the faithful, restore the lost, build up the Body of Christ."

Our new bishop will be charged to care for the Church, as the shepherd cares for a flock of sheep. She (or he) will, in turn, entrust other shepherds to care for the flock.

And this is a tradition – literally “handing-down” – that comes from when Christ laid his own hands on his Apostles. Every Bishop or Priest who receives this responsibility is touched by someone – who, however indirectly – was touched by Jesus.

II

We can imagine how Christ’s followers were feeling, in the weeks after the first Easter. Their leader had just been sacrificed. But then he had come back, and told them all that they were now entrusted as his shepherds!

There is no doubt that the news of Christ’s appearance had gladdened their hearts. But they had a new duty: to form a church that would grow without his physical presence! And the reading tells us that “day by day the Lord added to their number....”

And so in our lessons from *Acts*, last week’s reading talked about how many people were baptized by the Apostles. This week, we read about what those people did. “Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

Prayer, teaching, fellowship, and breaking bread together. Pretty much the basis of Christian worship!

Christ’s followers were “breaking bread at home and eating their food with glad and generous hearts.” They are sharing bread with each other, as Christ commanded them to.

It is interesting that, during this difficult time of social distancing, a lot of people are baking bread as a source of comfort. Flour and yeast are both in high demand. And many are sharing it at home, as well as with friends and neighbours – by dropping it off at their doors.

Jesus taught us to pray: “...give us today our daily bread....” Sharing bread – and all our resources – can bring us together, even during the difficult times that we are in.

III

In our gospel reading today we have an image of the shepherd who protects and feeds his sheep. But we also have the image of **the sheep in the sheepfold**. This is a **safe** place, walled or fenced in. It is big enough to pen sheep in by night – and possibly used by more than one shepherd and their flocks.

But it isn't big enough to graze all the sheep in. And so, the daily life of the shepherd is to take their sheep **out** to graze, and bring them **home** safely each night.

And that is a metaphor for our lives. We need to go out there and find food and water, and we need to stay together as a flock, under the protection of our shepherds! And, at nightfall, our shepherds will bring us home to the fold.

And here, Christ is more than just the shepherd. He is the way **into** and **out of** the sheepfold, and **both the shepherd and the sheep** have to pass through that gate!

Christ warns us of the “thieves and bandits” who may try to come into the sheepfold without getting past him. And these thieves and bandits – and all manner of other predator – are presumably also lurking outside the gate!

Sheep are vulnerable – and we kid ourselves, if we believe that we are not also vulnerable. It isn’t as simple as needing leaders – that can also get us into trouble – but is it needing **leadership**. That can come from inside all of us, by the grace of God.

(I remember reading Thomas Hardy’s *Far From The Madding Crowd*. A farmer is left destitute, after an untrained dog drives his flock of sheep over a cliff! Our future in this world is indeed precarious!)

And so we can all be shepherds, and can all love, and look after each other – remember, that was what Christ commanded us to do! A shepherd is a servant leader who journeys with us, through good times and bad. As the Psalm puts it:

“He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake. **Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil;**”

That’s what it is like to have a Good Shepherd walking with you. We recognize him by his voice, and we trust his guidance and wisdom.

At Easter, we have that image of the Good Shepherd, resurrected, and the mystery of the church becoming a reality. The Holy Spirit is shifting and changing in the post-crucifixion days – the church is taking shape, as Christ appears; first to one,

then to three, then to as many as 500 at a time! The wounded hands and feet of the Crucified and Resurrected Christ become the hands and feet of the Good Shepherd.

All we have to do is to be good shepherds, and make sure that all the sheep come safely back to the sheepfold, through the gate that Christ has prepared!

IV

Later in the psalm we hear, “for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” The rod and staff have been interpreted as having a symbolic meaning: the cross of Christ. It is certainly easier for us to take up his rod and staff than for us to take up his cross, and be crucified. But that is also the Good News – **he** was crucified for **us**!

St. Peter tells us that we can go astray like sheep, but that the good shepherd will bring us home. And so, we confess that: “We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep...” But we know that we are forgiven, because the good shepherd loves us. And when we are lost, he goes looking for us, and rejoices when he finds us!

St Augustine notes in his *Confessions*, that sin can chain us. But he also notes that “...freedom is an important element – God wants us to freely choose and not to be coerced – in receiving God, then we are truly free.” It is the human condition, which sets us against God’s will, just as it allows us to choose God’s promise of salvation.

And it is our pastoral job to be the shepherd that cares for the flock, protects it from the worst excesses of this condition, and seeks out the lost sheep.

V

So, we are left with some slightly confusing images. The Lord is my Shepherd. Christ as the Good Shepherd, but Christ also as the Paschal Lamb; ourselves perhaps as both shepherd and flock. It is sometimes hard to sort out the shepherds from the sheep; the leader from the led; the protector from the protected.

Is it **God** the shepherd, and Christ the sacrificed sheep? Or is it **Christ** the shepherd, and his followers the sheep? Or are **we** – Christ’s people – the shepherds, and everyone else, the lost sheep?

It is **all of the above**. But not just a hierarchy – because, remember, Christ walks **with** us, as well as in front of us. And that means that God walks with us. And that means that we walk with God. That is the Good News – that we have a God who is with us when we go out to the pasturelands, and with us when we return to the sheepfold.

The “bad news” – and it isn’t really bad – is that we also have to walk with Jesus. And that means we are all His shepherds. And, at last, we will all be welcomed back into His sheepfold.

May we all, during this difficult time, continue to show compassion, and continue to share with each other in the breaking of bread, at least in spirit. This time will pass, and

we'll all remember how wonderful it was to have time to make bread, and enjoy its aroma wafting through the house.

During this time of “lockdown” and “distancing”, let us hope for a time of renewal, and always be thankful for what we have.

May God have mercy on us all.

Halleluja!

Amen.

