

Acts 4:5-12

John 10: 11-18

“I know my sheep and my sheep know me”

In some congregations this Sunday in the Church year is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. The Gospel reading gives away the reason for this description. In the Church of England nationally it is labelled as Vocation Sunday.

I don't think there are many shepherds in the congregation this morning and indeed I can't think of any fields left unbuilt on in Manningham although we still process wool in the area. In Old Testament times and at the time of Jesus shepherds were a common sight in local fields. Shepherds at that time tended to look after small flocks of sheep that were kept for their wool. Shepherds tended to know all their sheep by name as they would keep them for many years.

Being a shepherd could be a dangerous job because they would encounter wild animals and sometimes, but not often, they were killed while protecting their sheep. The sheep would recognise the call of their shepherd. The flock would follow that call. Jesus distinguishes between himself, as the Good Shepherd, and the hired hand who might be in temporary charge of the sheep and who bales out when danger threatens. Jesus looks after his flock on a permanent basis. Jesus is the gate to us all attaining salvation.

The analogy of God as the Good Shepherd and human beings as sheep is one of the most persistent in scripture, both in the Old and New Testament. Few of us today think about ourselves as sheep but, just like the shepherds of old, God though knows us all, he knows us by name and if we listen we will hear his call.

The Gospel reading refers repeatedly to the flock of sheep, rather than to individual sheep. As part of a flock we are all linked together. We are all members of one flock. Jesus saves us and he also loves others outside our flock. We have a particular responsibility to our own flock while Jesus has a particular concern for all flocks including those we don't know. Jesus' love is for everybody not just us.

Our response to God is often summed up by the 23rd Psalm “The Lord is my Shepherd” God sees that we are never in need, he keeps us safe all the days of our life and thereafter we will live in the house of the Lord forever.

John tells us in the Gospel reading that Jesus is the good Shepherd. This is one of John's “I am” passages. Whereas the hired hand wants to use the sheep to make him money and status God is not a hired hand, we belong to him, he cares for us in every danger, he sees that we are fed and looked after. Of course not everything in our lives is going to be perfect, some of us will have amazing struggles and problems but Jesus is still there for us. We need to listen to what God says to us. If we listen we will be nurtured, healed and forgiven. God leads but it is up to us to follow him.

There are seven “I am” passages in John's gospel of which this morning's reading is one. I am tempted to ask whether you can remember the other six but do not worry because I am going to give you the answer! Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.” “I am the light of the

world” “I am the gate” “I am the way, truth, and life” “I am the vine or the true vine” “I am the resurrection and the life”. This morning he says to us “I am the good shepherd”.

Our Lectionary actually cuts out both the beginning and the ending of this section. At the end we hear that “At these words the Jews were again divided. Many of them said: “He is demon possessed and raving mad. Who will listen to him” But others said: “These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind.””

Why should we listen to Jesus when there are so many other voices competing for our attention? We listen to Jesus because he loves us. He gave his life – only to take it up again. He died on the Cross for us only to be resurrected three days later. Jesus gave his life to save us, his sheep, from mortal danger. His was a sacrificial love, the love of the Shepherd for us, his sheep.

As a Church we need to be alert to the needs of others. Because wolves have never been sighted in the building here at St Paul’s there is no reason for us to fall asleep. In our parish massive amounts of work is going on within the community as is detailed in the Annual Report written for the APCM to be held next week. As Church we have a duty to be more aware than others of the plight of others.

Are we willing to follow Jesus’ calling whatever that means. The early Church members were afraid of being thrown into jail or being martyred in their following of Jesus. We are unlikely to suffer in those ways here in Bradford although we may suffer some abuse but sometimes we find it difficult to proclaim Christ because we fear upsetting others.

Our reading from Acts makes it clear that we are called to share in the Good Shepherds care “He laid down his life for us ... and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. We are not showing God’s love to others if we don’t share our love with others.

Today is designated as Vocation Sunday by the national Church when we, as individuals, are particularly asked what we can offer to enhance Christ’s mission. A Vocation is something we are called to, not something we think up for ourselves, the calling comes to us from God. We can all offer something because we are never too old or too young to respond to God’s call. God calls us all, young and old alike.

Are you being called to a vocation by God but you are too shy or hesitant to say “Yes”. In the Bible we find many of those called to a vocation are reluctant to say “yes”. Many of us share their fear of the unknown. The prophet Jeremiah said to God “Lord Yahweh, I do not know how to speak. I am only a child” before he eventually answered the calling. Moses made more excuses than some of us have had hot dinners before eventually accepting his calling. Sadly some people reject God’s calling absolutely.

There are lots of possible vocations and none of them is superior to any other. Vocation Sunday is not about persuading us all to become vicars or readers although volunteers would be welcome. The day is about encouraging us to live life while at the same time responding to God. We need to be part of a world that is full of sin in order to relate to what is around us.

As Christians we are called to share the story of Jesus in diverse ways. For most of us vocation means staying where we are and recognising that, through our baptism, we have a

vocation to be part of the ministry of the Body of Christ in our local situation. For a small number it means a vocation in a wider setting.

In our reading from Acts Peter and John healed a man. The healing was not about them because they did it in the name of Jesus. Peter calls Jesus the cornerstone. Peter is saying to us that Jesus should be the foundation of our lives. The religious leaders had rejected Jesus but he is our support and our power. Jesus, our shepherd, cares for us. It is through how people see us that they, in turn, see Jesus.

We need to listen for the voice of the Shepherd. If he sees us heading in the wrong direction he will encourage us to change direction. If we do not listen then we will never become aware of a need let alone of a call to respond to that need.

Vocation is not just something for an individual. A flock of sheep help one another, some lead, others follow, others encourage. If vocation is to be achieved it needs a congregation that prays, challenges, encourages, nurtures, affirms and supports. Everyone needs this support but often they do not receive it. The body only functions effectively if all the parts of it pull together. If you feel you have a calling please follow it through however difficult it might seem to do that and however old you may be!

We know the shepherd but do we respond to his calling?

“Here I am Lord, Is it I Lord
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart”

Amen