

Sunday 21 April – Fourth Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Harold Toms

An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Today, the fourth Sunday of the Easter season is sometimes called: "Good Shepherd Sunday" because the readings in years A, B and C of our lectionary are taken from John chapter 10. As we heard this morning that chapter includes the passage in which Jesus describes himself as "the good shepherd". It is an image that has traditionally captured the imagination of artists and there are many depictions of Jesus as the good shepherd. In former times this would have been an image that needed little explanation, especially in rural societies the idea of the shepherd tending his or her flock; defending the sheep; feeding the sheep; and protecting the sheep would have been easily recognisable in the actions of contemporary shepherds. Everyone would have either known someone who was a shepherd or would at least have encountered a shepherd at work at some point in their life. But, here in the twenty-first century it is unlikely that many, perhaps even any of us know any shepherds. Because as a family we like to take walking holidays I can at least say that I have seen shepherds in action, although the young people on quad-bikes were probably a far cry from what Jesus had in mind when He called Himself the good shepherd.

To get a better idea of what this passage is about it is useful to look at the context in which it is set, going back into the previous chapter to where the narrative starts, and it actually begins with an account of a healing that might seem to have little to do with sheep and shepherds. Chapter 9 gives a detailed account of a man who was born blind, had lived his entire life without sight, being healed by Jesus. The Pharisees give him quite a grilling about who healed him, though they seem most incensed by the fact that the healing was done on the sabbath! We are told that the authorities were so doubtful about this healing that they even call the man's parents to confirm that he really had been born blind, though they (the parents) are so frightened they won't answer and get their son (who is an adult) to answer for himself. He openly tells them that it was Jesus who healed him and that to have done so shows that He (Jesus) must be from God, he simply says:

"... I was blind, now I see." John 9:25

The Pharisees are so infuriated that they drive him out, whereupon Jesus goes to him and the man becomes Jesus' follower. Jesus then begins the "Good Shepherd" narrative, part of which we had as our Gospel reading this morning, from which we can see that Jesus is effectively making a comparison between Himself and the Pharisees and Jewish authorities. The people are the flock (it is an image from the Old Testament that would have been quite familiar) and He is their shepherd, one who truly cares for their well-being and, as we heard at Easter, really is willing to lay down His life for His flock. One aspect of the Easter story, which should still be fresh in our minds, is that when Jesus is arrested He sees to it that only He is taken, all of the disciples and those with Him escape, not one is arrested with Him. By contrast then, the Pharisees and the Jewish authorities are identified with the hired hands who run away from danger because they don't care for the sheep in the way the good shepherd does.

In recent weeks there has been a new television series narrated by David Attenborough which, for me, has thrown further light on this passage about the good shepherd. As is so often the way with such programmes we see nature "red in tooth and claw" with predators hunting herds of potential prey. Almost always the predators need to prise one creature away from the rest in order that they can attack it. The instinct of the herd is to run and scatter, but this only makes them more vulnerable to be picked off by the hunters. With a flock of sheep the shepherd can keep them safe simply through his voice. It is a voice that the sheep have long become familiar with, a voice that they associate with care, safety, food, warmth. So when the flock is under attack it is a voice that they know from experience they can trust, because it is a voice they have known all their life. The shepherd has never let them down.

When Jesus called Himself "the Good Shepherd" He was linking Himself to the one they knew had been with them all their lives. Jewish scripture would have been so familiar that, like us, they would have been able to call to mind the words of Psalm 23, the Psalm that is, of course, appointed to be used today:

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" Psalm 23:1

Both His use of the phrase "I am", the divine name of the Lord, and also His identifying Himself as shepherd for the people complete what the man healed from blindness had testified about Jesus when he said:

"If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." John 9:33

His recognition of Jesus underlines what Jesus says about how His sheep know Him and He knows them. The man had not been one of Jesus followers but became one, not, it should be noted because of what Jesus did for him but, when Jesus came and sought him out after he had been thrown out by the Jewish authorities and Pharisees.

One final important detail from the passage comes in verse 16 where Jesus tells us:

"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."
John 10:16

I don't know for sure who these other sheep that Jesus refers to were. It may be that He was talking about gentiles (non-Jewish believers). The point here is that Jesus' flock comprises all those who listen to His voice. We are often tempted to think of Jesus' flock as being those who are like us and believe the same things that we do, but we are not the ones who determine who is in the flock and who isn't. Jesus' flock are all those who recognise and respond to His voice, whom He calls. Sometimes it can feel as though we have little in common with many who call themselves Christian. We cannot, indeed must not judge, Christ alone is the Good Shepherd. He knows His flock and they know Him, though it sometimes may not seem so, there really is just "one flock, one shepherd". Amen.