

Sunday 26 April – Fourth Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Liz Barnes

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

In the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The fourth Sunday of Easter is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday” and the image of God as our shepherd is such a familiar one. Indeed, the hymns that have been chosen for today feature sheep and shepherds in abundance. In biblical times, everyone knew a shepherd. It would have been to them a very familiar and helpful metaphor.

Psalm 23 which we have just sung as our gradual hymn this morning is a great text, yet she is like a distant but loved relative. We rarely visit her, yet she turns up at weddings and funerals, and in our lectionary comes to stay after Easter. We are glad to see her, for she always brings a word of hope and comfort. And she encourages us to celebrate, to celebrate the faithfulness, generosity and overflowing goodness of God, the good shepherd.

With chapter ten the tone of John's gospel changes. From the mystery of light, he turns to the mystery of Love and the first six verses of our reading this morning paint a pastoral scene. In a rural economy where sheep are the main wealth, sheep stealing is considered a profoundly serious crime. As Jesus tells a story about sheep stealing, he grips everyone's attention, and the audience would agree that of course the thief does not come in through the door. He creeps round the wall till he finds a convenient place to climb over. But the man who does come in through the door is the shepherd who owns the sheep.

Jesus goes on to describe what happens every morning in a sheepfold. This fold has several flocks penned there for the night. The shepherd calls his own flock, each of whom has a name, and he leads them out to graze, he walks one step in front of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. It is the voice which draws them – the voice they know and trust, calling each of them by name. A stranger's voice has the opposite effect. They run from it because they do not know or trust it.

Then we have another beautiful and precise illustration of the truth of I AM. In the figure of speech Jesus has used, one side of the gate is the courtyard of the sheepfold, and the other side is the open country.

I AM the gate of the sheep. The tenderness of Jesus breaks through the image of the sheepfold and speaks to our human need. You will be welcomed, restored, and made whole. To go in and out – to commute between earth and heaven – is to live the entire range of human life to the full, and this is what Jesus makes possible by offering himself as the do in contrast to all who came before him. *“The sheep stealer comes only to steel and kill and destroy. I have come that they might have life and have it in all its fullness.”*

That beautiful promise from Jesus to each one of us: “I have come that you may have life and have it in all its fullness.” It is not God’s purpose for us that we should live a sort of shadow existence. It is not God’s purpose that we should lead a hollow or less than satisfying life. He sent his son, Jesus, so that we could have life in all its fullness. And that is the message of Easter too, because it is through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, the taking of our burdens and cares onto himself, that it becomes possible for us to live life in all its fullness.

The Good Shepherd is a precious image of God, and as such does not remain for ever unchanged. Imagining God as a shepherd is to realise that God is not only ahead of us for us to follow or somehow above us on a throne. God is amid us, walking beside us, urging us on. God is searching for us - just over the horizon or in the next field and perhaps that means we can start to admit we are a bit lost.

Jesus the Good Shepherd is a picture of God, who is our friend, who knows us by name, whose voice we recognise, in whose arms we are safe, and on whose shoulders, we are carried home. God who comes looking for us when we are lost, whose voice, heard and loved, will be the very gateway from our own self- limiting beliefs into the freedom of the hills.

Amen