

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> April 2024 Easter 4; Benefice Holy Communion, Oswaldkirk.

I am sure you will have noticed in our surrounding fields the new generation of lambs and perhaps being made aware of the often-unseen shepherds protecting and caring.

Today in our Gospel, we have the familiar image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. In biblical times, everyone knew a shepherd. It would have been a very familiar and helpful metaphor that Jesus used to describe himself and the love of His Father. But is that still the case, is it still of help to us, is it rather old fashioned?

Perhaps, and yet, somehow, this image continues to speak to us as people of faith. Psalm 23 is still one of our most beloved psalms and passages in scripture, which brings much comfort especially to the sick and anxious and remains a standard reading at funerals. Jesus as the Good Shepherd is still one of the most familiar ways of thinking of him, because, if we are honest with ourselves, we all long for someone to lead us, protect us, and to guide us. We are like sheep, and we need a shepherd. In our church windows and art down the centuries we see Jesus depicted as a shepherd carrying a lamb that had wandered across his shoulders. This informs us of the personal relationship He has with every one of us. He declares that He knows His sheep and His own know Him. He tells us that this relationship is as intimate as the relationship He has with His Father and is unbreakable.

It is interesting to reflect on the nature of a sheep. They are what is known as “flock animals.” They don’t do so well on their own. They look for safety in numbers, and benefit from this and sheep seem to know this. Generally, we also like to be together, to gather in groups. We have a need to surround ourselves with like-minded people, in

sport and politics, at work and at school. 'Birds of a feather flock together', as the old saying goes. Church congregations, of course, are sometimes called flocks by their priest and a metaphor for a priest is 'shepherd'.

Congregations are not necessarily birds of a feather though. We might describe ourselves as Christian and Anglican and we come together to worship as believers, but beyond that we have many differences. We are different ages, we grew up in different parts of the country, we have different tastes in music, we support different sports teams, we have widely varying political views, and so on. We are not exactly birds of a feather, with the important exception that we are all followers of Jesus, and so, we gather as a flock, belonging and believing together.

The other thing sheep do well is to hear, especially to the voice of their shepherd. We too are meant to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd. Despite there being plenty of competing voices, all clamouring for our attention, from our TV's, our phones, and tablets, and so on, there is only one voice that truly matters and that is the voice of the Good Shepherd, the voice of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Sheep are good at listening to the voice of their shepherd, and we need to be, too.

And the third characteristic of sheep that I want to remind us of today is that they are natural followers. They don't like to be pushed, forced, or cajoled because if that happens, they will go astray, to be vulnerable to the wolves who await them, and may not return. It is the responsibility of their shepherd to gently lead them by loving trust. Then they let the shepherd go first, to make sure the way is safe, and then he invites them to follow him.

When it comes to our Lord, we are not just one in a sea of faces. He relates to us in a personal way, and he invites us

too to relate to Him in the same way. As disciples of Jesus, he who laid down his life for his sheep, we are each called to follow Him, joyfully, peacefully, and thankfully, and by His love, invite others, to His flock, to join in that same loving relationship that will lead them beside the still waters, where their souls will be restored by He who is the Good Shepherd, the Lamb of God, risen for us, who shows us the way. Alleluia.

Thanks be to God. Amen