

## Readings for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

25<sup>th</sup> April 2021

### First Reading: Acts 4:5-12

The Jewish rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

### Second Reading: 1 John 3:16-24

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

### Gospel: St John 10:11-18

Jesus said to the Pharisees: 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

## A Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

I have a bit of a soft spot for sheep. Lambs, of course, have far more than their fair share of cuteness and are just adorable bouncing around in the spring sunshine. But there is something placid and stoical about sheep munching grass that has always appealed to me too. In this area, I have got used to the idea that a sheep munching grass is totally focussed and will continue unwavering at the roadside as cars whizz by, inches from its behind. But I have also learnt to recognise that particular look of a sheep on the march, whose path crosses mine, that says 'I see you coming, and I am not stopping'. A sheep on a mission one might say, for whom one must slow down.

I know that my view of sheep is rose-tinted. The reality of keeping sheep is that it is hard work and that the life of a shepherd down the centuries has been harsh. Shepherds are out in all weathers and, as we know from the story of the Nativity, in Biblical times and much of the time since, were out at night, keeping watch over their flocks. According to St John's Gospel, though not in today's passage, the shepherd slept across the gate of the sheepfold and fought off predators.

Each year, on this fourth Sunday of Easter, our Gospel reading is part of Jesus' teaching from chapter 10 of John, in which Jesus speaks of himself as the 'Good Shepherd' - the reason that this Sunday is known as 'Good Shepherd Sunday'. The image of the shepherd comes from the Old Testament Scriptures. God was understood as the Shepherd of Israel, who cared for his people. We see this idea in the familiar Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my shepherd', which is the psalm set for today. Its last verse says 'surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...' - God, as shepherd, will always care for us.

In the Old Testament, kings were also seen as shepherds of the people, and the prophets denounced bad kings, bad priests and false prophets as bad shepherds. This idea is behind today's Gospel, in which Jesus contrasts himself, the 'Good Shepherd', with the religious authorities of the time cast as bad shepherds, the hired hands who do not truly care, and run away at the first hint of trouble.

A good shepherd really cares for the sheep, knows them and is known by them, ensures that they have food, shelter and safety. In Biblical times, a shepherd would have led the flock to places of good pasture, followed by the sheep who had learnt to know the voice of their own shepherd and to trust it. But perhaps the most important characteristic, mentioned four times in the Gospel and also in the reading from the first letter of John, is that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. This is also reflected in the passage from Acts when Peter says 'there is no other name under heaven...by which we must be saved'.

This is a core part of the Christian message, that Christ died for our sins. These readings make clear that he did so voluntarily, out of love for God the Father, to save all whom God loves. And God loved his Son so much that he raised him again. Furthermore, this is an all-encompassing love - not just for the religious elite, not just for the church, but for all. Jesus says 'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also'.

This Gospel passage speaks deeply to our desire to belong, our human need for community and companionship, and the image of the shepherd and the flock is basic to our understanding of our relationship with God and each other. But, just as Jesus' act of self-sacrifice shows us God's unconditional love for humanity, it also compels us to love one

another, to lay down our lives for each other, as the beginning of the passage from the first letter of John points out. A little later it goes on 'let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action'.

Love is something we do. It is not soft or sentimental. It is not the same as liking. It is a choice we have to make. Love in action is where we lay down our lives for others, by helping those in need, by standing up for those who are persecuted or discriminated against, by speaking truth to power. It takes time, energy and sometimes courage. And it is not easy, often meeting resistance, as Jesus and the early church discovered. But we all have an important part to play in showing our love for God and God's people through our actions.

In these post-Easter Sundays, as we hear the accounts of the early church, we have an opportunity to reflect on how we follow Christ's example and respond to God in our lives. Today is also 'Vocations Sunday'. 'Vocation' simply means 'calling', and our understanding of vocation should be much wider than a call to some form of ministry in the Church, or perhaps to those occupations that seem more like callings, that we maybe think seem to need a particular type of person – nurses or teachers perhaps. We are all called, and in many different ways. We are called to become fully human; to be baptised; to live our lives as Christians using the particular gifts God has given us. To be a bus driver, or in retail, or an accountant, or lawyer, or...dare I say it...a politician, can be as much a vocation as anything else if this is what we believe God would have us do. And, of course, vocation does not just relate to employment. We may have a vocation as a carer for another person, or to be a good listener, or a person of prayer. It is likely that we will have different vocations at different times in our lives, and probably more than one vocation at the same time. As Christians, part of our vocation, our calling, is to bring the values of our faith to any role.

Our churches need people with a whole host of vocations – as musicians; to manage the finances; to prepare the refreshments – and hopefully the days of refreshments will return before too long! All are necessary for the whole to function. As St Paul memorably wrote, the body has many members, and one member cannot say to another that it is not needed. In a church I was once part of, one lady had made the coffee after the service for many years. Someone else suggested that she had done her stint and that it was time for others to do the job instead. It was meant kindly - they also thought it was her turn to be served by others. But, when the time came and someone else took over, the lady concerned didn't know what to do with herself, and fortunately the decision was reversed. Preparing and serving coffee was her vocation, her love in action to care for God's people, the task that God had called her to.

So, this is not a prelude to me asking you all to take on additional tasks or to change something you do! Many people come to church simply to be, and that is important. However, today provides an opportunity to reflect upon our own gifts, and our roles, and what it might be that God is nudging each of us towards, in any part of our lives, in our love for one another and for the care of God's flock.