

The Good Shepherd

Preached at Littlemore on 6th Sunday after Trinity

2 Samuel 7. 1-14a

Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

This morning's two readings do not at first seem to have much in common.

In the Old Testament lesson David has been given rest from his enemies and is able to settle in his kingdom. However, he is forbidden from building a permanent temple for the Lord. God tells David through the prophet Nathan that the Lord has always been with his people Israel in their travels, and has never before required the shepherds of his people to build God a house of Cedar. However, clearly times are changing, for God promises David that his throne will be established forever, and that his heir would, indeed build what would become the Temple at Jerusalem. That heir would be Solomon.

In the Gospel reading we meet Jesus telling his disciples to rest from their exhausting ministry, but affirms that, just as David had been the shepherd of Israel, he, Jesus, would become the Good Shepherd. The passage that follows is omitted by the lectionary and is familiar to us as the feeding of the five thousand. Instead the lectionary concludes the Gospel reading with reference to Jesus' growing notoriety and healing miracles.

The common symbol I want to consider this morning is that of the shepherd.

Later in the service, Rachel will sing a piece from Handel's Messiah: "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: and he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young. Come unto him all ye that labour, ye that are heavy laden, and he will give you rest. Take his yoke upon you, and learn of him for he is meek and lowly of heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls."

I don't know about you, but I don't feel being described as a sheep as very flattering. They always strike me as being particularly daft animals. When you pass a field with sheep in it, there's always one that seems somehow to have managed to escape and is unable to get back in. No matter how gently you try to coax it, it always goes the wrong way. Sheep never seem to know what is good for them. I don't want to be a sheep; I'd much rather be a shepherd

As the Jewish people had been a nomadic, the shepherding metaphors would have been particularly pertinent to them. They were familiar with the picture in Scripture that portrayed Israel as a wayward flock and their kings as shepherds appointed by God. Indeed, Jesus would also have been preaching to people who were more familiar with shepherding than most of us.

I am reminded too that in the ordination service, priests are called to set the Good Shepherd before them as the pattern of their calling. However, I like to think of our clergy as Christ's sheepdogs, listening out for God's direction in protecting and herding

us as they whiz about the place barking and dealing with errant sheep. After all, isn't that why they wear a dog collar?

As so often happens when contemplating our spiritual direction we are faced with a paradox: are we sheep or are we shepherds? Are we lost ourselves, or should we be leading others? We even meet this paradox in Christ himself who is both the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God.

The Gospel reading helps us focus on the nature of this double life to which we are all called as Christians. The apostles had been so busy as shepherds that they had not even had time to feed themselves. They had been sent out two by two with orders to travel light and to go about among the villages proclaiming the gospel of repentance, casting out demons, and healing the sick. They were exhausted by their calling but knew there was more to be done, as the crowds kept following them.

This happens to us all in our daily lives and on our spiritual journeys. We can become so caught up with the jobs we have to do; with fulfilling the needs of others whom we don't want to let down; with our concerns for those who have trouble looking after themselves, that we, ourselves, become drained.

We must listen to God when he tells us to take a rest: Jesus told the apostles to rest, while he continued look after and feed the flock. We can rely on him too.

It is when we recognise that there is nothing more we can do that we place all our troubles in the hands of God — we simply hold up to him the ones we care for and entrust them to his care.

This is not giving up; it is a great act of faith and hope. We acknowledge our own limitations, we realise that we are not saviours, that we are only the agents of God. We are loving our neighbours to the very best of our ability and entrusting them to the Good Shepherd.

We are taking up Jesus's offer to travel with him across the waters to a lonely place to restore our spirits. We know that in his presence we can find rest for our souls and that all our cares and concerns will be taken care of. We have exhausted ourselves in service and prayer, now we can experience peace through contemplation. Others will take over from us, and we will discover that we really do belong to a Christian community—a community of love gathered in the name of Jesus.

We cannot be shepherds all the time, wearing ourselves down worrying about everyone else but ourselves. We must also be prepared to be sheep. This is a great insight; it brings us joy and the strength to go on. We realise that we are part of Christ's body the Church and that he is our Good Shepherd and our loving Saviour.

As we come forward for Communion, let us remember that in this Holy Eucharist he shall feed his flock like a shepherd, and we shall find rest unto our souls.