

**Wednesday 9 December 2020**

*Be strong, fear not, He will come and save you! (Is.35.4-6a)*

Dear Friends

One of the first baptisms I took in my last parish was the son of a shepherd. I'm not sure I'd ever met a shepherd before, and I rarely met this one, such were the length of his working days. For in the Cotswolds, of course, sheep are, even today, almost everywhere. They were even fairly frequently in our garden and Liz and I on half a dozen occasions, had to herd them back over the fences and make hasty repairs whilst awaiting the shepherd.

The image of the Good Shepherd is an important biblical theme and a central one in Advent. It was, after all, the failure of the existing 'shepherds' of the people of Israel, that led God to send us Jesus, the true Good Shepherd. As we all recall from nativity plays, there is nothing cuter than a small child dressed as a sheep accompanied by an older brother or sister dressed as a shepherd. Such romanticism enhances our Christmas but is far from the reality of a true shepherd's life.

For that we need to return to the Middle East where shepherds would be on duty almost 24hrs a day protecting their sheep from predators, leading them to water and grazing, rescuing those that strayed, rounding up the lost, taking care of the sick. This isn't a sentimental picture but one of very considerable hard work.

Which brings us to the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd; the one in whom we see God's love and self-giving care perfectly expressed. Not only is Jesus our shepherd, He is also the one who can lead us home safely into the fold; through His voice, through His care and through His love, we come to recognise the nature of His Father, our Creator God.

In the ordination service, those to be ordained priest are made especially aware of the importance of this imagery to their ministry. In the introduction to the service, the Bishop says that priests "are to set the example of the Good Shepherd always before them as the pattern of their calling" and later declares "Priests are called to be servants and shepherds among the people to whom they are sent".

I recall being overawed by this comparison and responsibility. The burden eases when one accepts that this is not about imitating Christ or acting in His place, but about 'modelling' a way of relating for others to follow. In other words, we can all be shepherds...

This year has seen countless examples of relatives, friends and strangers becoming shepherds to others in their community in the face of COVID19. Biblical motifs are helpful, but they simply point to ways of relating that are all around us already. Christ, The Good Shepherd, has jumped out of the Bible and out of our nativity plays and is in the midst of us. That is after all, what Immanuel means, God with us.

The Church points others towards Christ at Christmas, but the Church has no monopoly on the love of Christ at work in the world. The Holy Spirit is rather bigger than that.

This presents us with a missional challenge. We might think that our primary purpose as the Church is to draw people towards God; to rescue the lost sheep to return to the original analogy.

I wonder though if it isn't also to remind people of goodwill, that the source of their unconditional love for others, especially of strangers, isn't simply an expression of human goodness, but goes rather deeper than that; it is an expression of the Spirit of Love that rests at the heart of creation and which we call God.

At a time when love is not in short supply, perhaps our challenge is to claim that love for God and start naming it for what it is.

To some ears that might sound religiously imperialistic – making false claims for our God. But that's not what I'm suggesting. As God simply means 'I AM', I think we can suggest that universal love is the voice of the universal God who speaks through all faiths and none. That some people of goodwill are not comfortable naming the voice that stirs their hearts and minds to incredible acts of self-giving love, *doesn't mean that voice isn't speaking*.

Some of us recognised the voice of God in our lives at a very early age. For some of us it has taken most of a lifetime. For others it will taken even longer than that. However long it takes, God loves and welcomes us all.

Have a peaceful Advent

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