

**SERMON FOR EASTER 4: BENEFICE SERVICE AT WYLYE 30-04-23 (based mainly on John 10: 1 - 10, with reference to 1 Peter 2: 19-25 and Psalm 23)**

**Sheep and life within the sheepfold**

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

The readings in the lectionary for today include Psalm 23, which shares with John's Gospel, and indeed 1 Peter, the metaphor of sheep and shepherd. Metaphors can help us to better understand the nature of something or a situation, in this case of our relationship with God. So what does the image of sheep and their shepherd conjure up for you? And how relevant is this Bible image for us nowadays?

It's rather appropriate to be hearing about sheep when the fields around us are dotted with frolicking lambs! You don't have to be a shepherd to fear for the newly born as they explore the world around them, quickly becoming accustomed to legs that can carry them to all sorts of new adventures..... and all kinds of potential danger. Modern day shepherding in much of our countryside is a far cry from how it was undertaken 2000 years ago. Then, and still in harsher regions of the world, shepherds guarded the sheep day and night, prepared to risk danger. A shepherd built up a relationship of trust with his sheep over time. Sheep were not driven but led, and they learned to recognise the shepherd's voice. Even today we can see that what links sheep and shepherd is the flock's need of protection. So what better image to use when depicting the relationship between an errant humankind and a loving God or his Saviour son?

Psalm 23 is perhaps the best known of all the Psalms. The image of the shepherd and his sheep tells us that God leads and protects, feeds and comforts us. Through the efforts of God, our shepherd, we benefit from being part of his flock. Although the scene in the Psalm appears to be idyllic, with its green pastures and still waters, dangers lurk in those dark valleys. Even as we eat, we may be surrounded by enemies – we are vulnerable. However, the Psalm conveys a sense of trust in the shepherd: “for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me”.

Turning to the Gospel reading, we find Christ in Jerusalem for a Jewish festival, which his critics prevent him from enjoying by demanding he explain

exactly who he is. He does so by using that same image of sheep and shepherd. Christ's listeners that day were the sheep who did not recognise God's voice in that of Jesus and so did not follow, did not belong. In trying to show up Jesus as diverging from the religious norm of the day, these critics were in fact placing themselves outside the flock. Christ's sheep are kept safe in the sheepfold; those beyond the gate are exposed. But, when he leads his sheep out, they hear and know his voice; they follow and are safe from those who seek to lead them astray.

So, what sort of sheep are we? We do at times use the term negatively to label people who seem to have no mind of their own. But, in the context of our faith, many might say that, on the contrary, we make a conscious decision to follow Christ, to welcome him into our lives. If we do see ourselves as his flock, it is as a community finding strength and common purpose in fellowship. We belong, yet we remain individually known to, and cared for by God.

How does the concept of shepherd and sheep extend into our everyday lives? As human beings we are social and feel a need to belong, be it to a family, a community or an organisation. That need changes at different stages of life. Teenagers tend to form cliques or gangs. Most of us probably grow out of that by middle age (or not!), yet, if anything, the need to belong increases as we age. Perhaps this is part of the reason why people often return to Church later in life - a need to combat a growing sense of vulnerability, through fellowship and belonging.

Yet at the same time, within those social structures, we seek to retain our personal identity, our sense of worth as individuals. However, although our identities have the potential to be enhanced, they can equally be lost by being part of a group. Surely we are all more than simply what it says on the label - job seeker, factory worker, politician, aristocrat, pensioner - more than just another sheep in the flock. And what happens when we no longer belong? A friend was made redundant from his job of 30 years. Redundancy sums it up - surplus to requirements, a small cog in a big wheel, a statistic, a number that could be crossed off. He lost touch with former colleagues and friends; lost his sense of purpose and identity. If we can trust the organisation or group to which we belong, we feel valued and safe. Yes, humans are social

creatures; but trusting and feeling cared about as individuals is what helps us to function well within those social structures.

So, for Christians, the Church provides a metaphorical sheepfold where we find Christ, our shepherd and protector. However, just as on our farms, where each sheep is counted and has value, so too does Christ know us individually. The TV programme 'One man and his dog' has accustomed us to the fact that sheep nowadays are driven as a flock rather than led. But that is not God's way, and was never Jesus'. Humans stray too, but are always welcomed back into Christ's flock. Peter, in his letter, likened his readers to straying sheep that had returned to the shepherd, the guardian of both their lives and their souls. I feel the metaphor does still work today, reflecting a basic human need to belong, to trust, and to make our own decisions. We are spiritually protected and provided for; we are equally valued; we connect with both the guiding voice of Christ and the Christian community; and our shepherd knows each of us should we lose our way. It is indeed good to be one of Christ's flock.

In the name of Christ, amen.