

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 26th April 11am

1 John 3: 16-24

The good shepherd...

Thirty-five years ago, when I started out as a local preacher, my mentor Marjorie Hopp warned me to beware 'warm and woolly' Sunday.

Yesterday at Synod, a fellow minister told me she always calls it Little Bo Peep Sunday. Sheep are cute.

Shepherds looking after their cute sheep are utterly admirable.

It's all too easy to preach reassuring cosiness.

And indeed, whenever I find myself preaching on woolly Bo Peep Sunday, I am shocked afresh at the challenge of these readings.

In the gospel reading, which we will hear a little later, Jesus is the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

That's how we know he is good.

That's how we know what love is.

In this reading from the first letter of John, we are told to go and do the same.

We read these sentences from the Bible so glibly.

Really?

Would we?

In two minutes, turn to your neighbour, and just talk to each other about this.

What makes it so hard for us to think of ourselves as good shepherds?

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A Swedish family are enjoying lunch on the terrace of a plush ski resort.

Suddenly an avalanche, which had seemed like a spectacular distant event, threatens to engulf them all.

If that was you, what would you do?

In the film *Force Majeure*, which won the Jury prize at Cannes this year, Tomas leaves his wife and two children, and runs.

But first he grabs his smartphone.

Afterwards, several of the characters in the film try to make excuses for him.

In a crisis, you don't really think.

Your survival instinct just takes over.

This isn't really you.

The philosopher Julian Baggini, writing in the Guardian last week, doesn't buy that. Aristotle knew better, he says. Of course moments of crisis happen. Of course they come out of the blue. Of course we act without thinking. But how we act in a moment of crisis shows us who we are. As someone said to me recently, when you squeeze a tube of toothpaste, toothpaste comes out.

Aristotle believed that we create the person we are by the little unspectacular, ordinary choices we make day by day. In Force Majeure, Tomas and his family have come on a ski-ing holiday for some quality time together, because Tomas has been overworking. He has promised to leave his laptop behind. Switch off his phone. Pay attention to his wife. His children. In one scene his wife, Ebba, convinced he is not really listening to her, calls out from the bathroom – *are you on your phone?* No – he says. But he is. It's a tiny incident. One of those little white lies that we tell every day to smooth domestic relationships. But Aristotle would say it is just a small part of the overall pattern of behaviour that makes Tomas who he is. It's our daily habits that create our orientation as people. And then – when an avalanche engulfs the sunny terrace where we are sitting eating lunch with our family – then we see what is important to us. The toothpaste comes out of the tube.

On 8 September 1880 at Seaham Colliery, County Durham, 164 men and boys were trapped in the pit and suffered a slow death. When the rescuers finally reached the bottom of the pit they found a message chalked on a plank. It read:
*The Lord is with us, we are all ready for heaven ...
We have had a jolly prayer meeting, every man ready for glory.
Praise the Lor.
Signed Ric Cole.*
Richard Cole was a Primitive Methodist local preacher who would often minister to his colleagues from the pulpit. Here, at the tragic conclusion of his life, he ministered to them for the last time as a dying man to dying men.

Few of us, I imagine, will be called to show what we are made of in such catastrophic circumstances.

Mostly, we are called to lay down our lives in quite a different way.

We are called to daily cultivate the habits of mind and heart and body which define who we are.

What we are like.

Whether the love of Christ motivates and inspires and activates us.

As Rachel Lampard reminded us at Synod yesterday, buying a banana, choosing an energy supplier, telling a joke – these are political and ethical acts.

On Thursday the church council took an iconic decision.

Hinde Street will sign up to the Inclusive Church movement.

"We believe in inclusive Church - church which does not discriminate, on any level, on grounds of economic power, gender, mental health, physical ability, race or sexuality. We believe in Church which welcomes and serves all people in the name of Jesus Christ; which is scripturally faithful; which seeks to proclaim the Gospel afresh for each generation; and which, in the power of the Holy Spirit, allows all people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ."

We talked about this at our church council meeting in November.

We talked about it at our General Church Meeting in March.

We talked about it again on Thursday night.

We decided.

Yes, this is who we are.

But now we have to do something about it.

Now we have to put it into practice.

What does it mean for us to be an Inclusive Church?

What does it mean to publicly sign up to being inclusive?

How do we welcome people who don't always feel included in church?

How do we encourage them to believe they belong?

How do we look out for those who are new to this place?

How do we make them feel at home?

How do we listen to the voices which are not often heard?

Or the voices that never bother to speak because they assume they will not count?

And if we listen, will we pay attention?

Will we do anything in response?

And when I say 'we', I mean me.

What will I do?

What will you do?

How will our lives be different?

What little, daily, weekly, acts will show the orientation of this place towards including rather than excluding?

Towards belonging?

You'll be pleased to know that we resisted setting up another committee to look at these things!

But a number of people on church council volunteered to be part of a task group to listen and discuss and act to put what we said on Thursday into practice every day.

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech, but with actions and in truth.

We won't always get it right.

As we said earlier, one of the reasons we shy away from wanting to set ourselves up as good shepherds is that we will inevitably fail.

We don't want to look like hypocrites.

So perhaps it's easier not to try.

But look at our 'who are we?' statement on the Hinde Street website.

It ends like this:

In all these things we fail as often as we succeed; but we continue to trust in God's unconditional love, and in the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Look again at today's lectionary reading:

This is how we belong to the truth, and how we set out hearts at rest in his presence.

If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts.

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John 10: 11-18

I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

In 1 John we are clearly challenged to be good shepherds.

Here in John's gospel, it is Jesus who is the definitive good shepherd.

We are the sheep.

I don't know about you, but I find it even harder to think of myself as a sheep than as a shepherd.

I remember going to see John Schlesinger's film *Far from the Madding Crowd* as a young teenager.

Do you remember that scene where an inexperienced young sheep dog drives a flock of sheep over the edge of a cliff?

Gabriel Oak's dream of life as an independent sheep farmer is ruined.
Whenever I think of sheep I think of that scene.
Who'd want to be a sheep?

In two minutes, turn to your neighbour, and just talk to each other about this.
What makes it so hard for us to think of ourselves as sheep?

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I was interested to read in the paper this week that the number of nuns signing up is on the increase.
In 2014 it reached a 25-year record high.
Now to be honest, we are not talking huge numbers.
45 last year.
But ten years earlier the number was only 7.
What is this about?

Theodora Hawksley is 29.
She left her postdoctoral research in theology at Edinburgh University to join the Congregation of Jesus in January this year.
She said she was attracted to the liberty offered by religious life.
I was drawn to it by wanting a greater freedom in being able to give myself to God and the world.
I don't have to worry now about practical things like making a career for myself.
I'm free to go where I'm needed and meet people at the margins.

Father Christopher Jamison, director of the Vocations Office of the Catholic church, said:
There is a gap in the market for meaning in our culture.

I'm not drawing a parallel between nuns and sheep.
Heaven forbid!
But I think I am saying that the qualities Jesus is looking for in his followers don't include mindless imitation.
Thoughtless conformity.
Wooliness.

It is about a quality of relationship.
I am the good shepherd.
I know my own, and my own know me.

Know.
The Greek verb is *ginosko*.

Ginosko doesn't mean to know – as in I know my seven times table, or know the answer to this crossword clue.

This kind of knowledge is not a cognitive category, but a category of relationship.

I know my own, and my own know me.

Just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father.

The third reading the lectionary offers today is Psalm 23.

We will be spending time with that psalm a little later.

But for me one of the fascinating things about psalm 23 is the change of pronoun half way through.

The Lord is my shepherd...

He makes me lie down in green pastures...

But then:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

For you are with me.

This is no longer a third person description of an abstract quality.

It is a relationship.

You are with me.

And it is a relationship that gives us the freedom to be ourselves.

In lives that are busy and pressurised and stressful, we are reminded of the existence of green pastures and still waters.

In fact we are led to them.

The shepherd knows our needs better than we do.

In times of loneliness and despair and questioning and anger at the unfairness of life, the shepherd is not a remote presence, but a companion.

You.

You are with me.

Looking at Jon Kuhrt's blog, I found his entry for this time last year.

It's a re-write of Psalm 23 by *Marcia K. Hornok*.

The clock is my dictator, I shall not rest.

It makes me lie down only when exhausted.

It leads me into deep depression.

It hounds my soul.

It leads me in circles of frenzy, for activities sake.

Even though I run frantically from task to task, I will never get it all done,

For my ideal is with me.

*Deadlines and my need for approval, they drive me.
They demand performance from me, beyond the limits of my schedule.
They anoint my head with migraines,
My in-box overflows.*

*Surely fatigue and time pressures shall follow me all the days of my life.
And I will dwell in the bonds of frustration.
Forever.*

This brings me full circle, to the challenge of being good shepherds ourselves.
The challenge that we will never meet.
The challenge that might drive us into the bonds of frustration in trying to be good, trying to be perfect.

Jesus is the good Shepherd.
Yes we are called to think about what that means for our lives.
But we are challenged to do it in the context of our status as sheep.
It is only in knowing God that we will be whole human beings.
It is only in listening for God's voice that we will hear what we need to hear.
And it may not be *do more stuff*.
It may be *stop*.
Lie down.
Rest.

It may be an invitation to step out of the vicious circle of trying hard, and feeling guilty.
If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts.

Perhaps being an inclusive church means that we need to find the time and space to get in touch with our inner sheep.

*The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures
He leads me beside still waters
He restores my soul.*