

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 25th April 2021
The fourth Sunday of Easter

Collect

Risen Christ,
faithful shepherd of your Father's sheep:
teach us to hear your voice
and to follow your command,
that all your people may be gathered into one flock,
to the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

1 John 3:16-end

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.

John 10:11-18

'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.'

Sermon

I'm going to invite you to picture a scene. It is a scene of lush, green pasture. Perhaps a verdant field among the patchwork of fields that are so familiar in the English landscape. Or you may prefer to picture a more open field, perhaps on higher ground, with surrounding moorland.

This pasture is where sheep graze, getting the nourishment that they need to survive. Somewhere in the scene there is also clear water. Perhaps a running stream, or maybe a fresh pond, filled from higher ground. This provides the hydration that the sheep need to survive.

As you continue to picture this scene, I want you to notice that as well as the green pasture and clear water, there are also darker places. If your pasture is on higher ground, this may include rocky outcrops. Lower down, it may be woodland where hidden dangers may lurk. Not all of the parts of this scene are safe – the sheep are in need of protection.

And so, somewhere in the pasture, there is a sheep pen. It may be a fenced off area, or perhaps there are dry stone walls, depending on your landscape. This is a place where the sheep can gather together safely, protected from hidden dangers.

Except that the sheep cannot stay in the pen forever, because they need the lush grass and clear water in order to survive. This is where the shepherd comes in. It is the shepherd's job to lead the sheep to the freshest grass and cleanest water, returning them safely to the pen. If the pen does not have a secure gate, the shepherd will often lie across the entrance to protect the sheep during the nighttime.

Keep imagining this scene as we take a walk with the sheep. Begin in the sheep pen. I wonder how it is that they feel in this space. Perhaps it is a little constrained, but they are warm and sheltered. Surrounded by other sheep. There is protection. Imagine how that feels. And consider, too, how it would feel to know that you can't stay in this place of safety. That you need to leave it in order to get food and drink.

What does it feel like to leave the confines of the pen? Perhaps some of the sheep like it more than others. Perhaps some are desperate for more freedom, or keen to explore. Others might be more hesitant. Which ones do you relate to? What would make the nervous sheep more confident? I wonder, are there places or experiences in your own life that feel a little like the pen?

And now consider how it feels to be in the pasture. To have rich nourishment. To have more freedom than you experience in the pen. I wonder how safe the pasture feels. And what about the still waters, where you can get fresh, clear water to drink. What does it feel like to be beside the stream or pond? Do you prefer to be alone or with others? Do you have any sense of lurking danger? Again, where, for you, are the green pastures and clear waters of your own life?

What do those darker areas feel like? Where there is danger and risk. Does it make a difference if you are there with others or on your own? And think how you feel about the shepherd, who steers you away from the darker areas, and comes to rescue you if you are lost or frightened. Which are the darker areas of your own experience?

Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd because he wanted us to identify with this scene. To understand that, whether we are a bit of a risk-taker, or really quite shy and anxious, the Good Shepherd is always there to look after the sheep. More than that, the Good Shepherd is prepared to lay down his own life for the safety of the sheep.

Just think a little about what that means. While there are very few modern day martyrs – particularly in the western world – and most of us will not be called upon to lay down our lives, it can be an interesting exercise to consider what it is that we would be prepared to die for. Which causes, people, situations are sufficiently important to us. And then realise that what Jesus is saying is that each and every one of us is so important to him that he is prepared to lay down his life for us. Indeed, that is exactly what he has done.

Jesus does this because he loves us. And what he asks in return is that we love on another. And, as the letter of John reminds us, this is not loving in word or speech only, but rather in deeds and action.

And this makes a rather neat connection with the renewal of the Scout promise that will take place this morning. The words of both the laws and promises for each of the Scout sections remind us that all of you who are part of the Scout Association are committed to looking out for one another, and looking out for other people in society. It's what you're all about. It's how we can identify you. When we meet someone loyal, helpful, friendly, considerate and courageous we know that there is a good chance that they are part of the Scout Association.

And for Christians, these are the qualities that we are called to, too.

What I admire about the Scouting movement is that the Scouts that I meet don't just make their promise – important though that is. They live it out. That is why you renew your promise each year. As a reminder that everything it says shapes your lives.

Amen