

4th Sunday of Easter

At this time of year with lambs gambolling in the fields it would be easy to have a romantic notion of the life of a shepherd in the time of Jesus. In reality their lot was a hard one, not only physically, but also because their work meant they could not fulfil many of the religious obligations that were imposed and were regarded by many people as, at best dodgy characters, and at worst, outside the Law. So, in some ways for Jesus to call himself the Good Shepherd was a difficult concept. However, in the Old Testament, and especially in the prophet Ezekiel God is called a Shepherd and is compared to the religious and political leaders who fleeced the people and abandoned them in hard times, whereas God was utterly loyal to God's people, protecting, feeding and healing the people.

In the gospel for today Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, compares himself to the hirelings who abandon the sheep in times of danger, and no less than five times in our short passage says that he lays down his life for his sheep. That is a strong image, laying down one's life, and we know what it cost Jesus in the end, as the religious and political leaders of his own day joined forces against him and had him crucified. But that was not the end, because God raised him from the dead. There is a hint of death and resurrection in the final words of today's passage, 'as it is in my power to lay it – life - down so it is in my power to take it up again.'

There are many examples of people laying down their lives for others. We think of medical staff who contracted the Coronavirus and died while trying to preserve the lives of others. We think of all those who have thought of the well being of others rather than their own safety in providing public transport, delivering food and other essential supplies, staffing supermarkets throughout this terrible pandemic. Also think of the huge number of unpaid carers, some still children, who look after sick or elderly parents. As more people live longer so the condition known as dementia, of which Alzheimer's is the most common, is affecting more and more people. In 2020 there were over 50 million people worldwide living with dementia. Statistics suggest that this number will almost double every 20 years, reaching 82 million in 2030 and 152 million in 2050. Much of the increase will be in developing countries. More and more of us will have a parent or a sibling with dementia and will have decisions to make about their care. This may well involve 'laying down our lives' especially if we are able to take them into our own homes.

In the responsorial psalm we had the following sentence twice, "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love has no end." Goodness and love speak their own language because they go beyond words into actions. The image Jesus presents of the Good Shepherd willing to lay down his life for his sheep, is one that can encourage us not to remain as bystanders simply looking from a distance on those in need, but to put goodness and love into action by tending, as far as we can, to the needs of others.

Bidding Prayers for the 4th Sunday of Easter

Celebrant:

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his flock. Following his example may we heed his voice and offer our prayers for the needs of the world.

Reader:

For all Christians who seek to follow the Good Shepherd – that they will pray and work for the unity for which Jesus himself prayed.

Lord in your mercy

For our political and civic leaders – that they will have a deep respect for the whole of creation, using the world's natural resources wisely, caring for the environment, protecting animals and making it possible for all people to live in peace.

Lord in your mercy

For those who suffer in body, mind or spirit, especially those with incurable diseases and those with dementia – that they will receive the love, care and support they need at this time.

Lord in your mercy

For those who are feeling a call from God – that they will respond to that call with generosity to ordained ministry, the religious life or many other vocations, married or single.

Lord in your mercy

For those who have died, all victims of violence, accident, natural disaster and the COVID-19 pandemic, and Leslie Osbaldeston, Gerard Higgins, Lavar Heaton, Ethel Davies, Alice Ardern, Michael Murphy, Ian Peter Johnson and Thomas McGreal whose anniversaries occur this week – that they and all who have died may rest in peace and rise in glory.

Lord in your mercy

Either aloud or in silence we pray for our own special intentions...pause...then

Lord in your mercy

We ask the prayers of Mary as we say, Hail Mary...

Celebrant:

All loving God, your Son Jesus, the Good Shepherd never leaves the flock untended but always watches over us with care. Help us to imitate him in our care for others, especially those most in need. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen