

4th Sunday of Easter

Occasionally we have in the church a visual aid for the gospel passage of the day, and today is one such occasion. It is one of the two stained glass windows to my right, namely Jesus the Good Shepherd, one of the first and most loved images of Jesus. The image of God as Shepherd was used significantly by some of the Old Testament prophets who very often used this image to criticise their own religious and political leaders, either for their lack of real leadership, or their failure to care for the people, whom they fleeced rather than fed.

At this time of year when the fields have lambs running after their mothers there is a temptation to have a sentimental view of shepherds. In fact the lot of a shepherd was a hard one spending most of the time outdoors and for several months of the year wandering round finding new pastures. They had little standing in the local community and, with tax collectors were not allowed to hold public office. And yet Jesus chooses to use this image of the shepherd, tending his sheep to the point of being willing to sacrifice his own life. The combination of tenderness and toughness, care and self sacrifice, is at the heart of his own model of leadership. He is not detached from people rather he reaches out to all, especially those on the margins, those whom the religious leaders of his day regarded as unclean or unworthy. This caused great opposition, and this kind of Shepherd leadership cost him his own life. He literally 'laid down his life for his sheep.'

In his life and in his death Jesus sought out the lost, the least and the last. When he wanted to speak of a tender God he told people about a shepherd, who when one of his sheep goes missing, leaves the others to search for the lost one. He refuses to accept the loss of one sheep as 'just one of those things'. He searches for the lost one until he finds it and putting it on his shoulders he calls his neighbours to rejoice with him.

This is the image of Jesus' pastoral care, telling us that he has come to seek out the lost, never giving up on anyone. We know searching for the lost is not automatic, many losses are not even registered, think of those who 'go missing' in countries led by dictators. Where there is no love there is no loss. Some people are regarded as 'no great loss', others are encouraged to 'get lost'. But we hope that if and when we are lost, someone will come to find us, taking Jesus the Good Shepherd as their example.

The Good Shepherd leaves us with a question. Do we leave people who are lost to their own devices, or go in search of them. We might think of those in Ukraine who have lost their lives, lost members of their families, their homes, their independence, their innocence, their peace, their future. Wives and children who have lost their husbands and fathers. This is just one country and we know that people are lost because of the violation of human rights elsewhere. How can we highlight and pressurise those in authority and with power to bring about change? What can we do to help bring these 'lost sheep' to a place of belonging?

Bidding Prayers for the 4th Sunday of Easter

Celebrant:

Cry out with joy to the Lord all the earth. With these words of the Psalm in our hearts we turn to God in prayer.

Reader:

For the Church under the guidance of Pope Francis – that the Church will encourage all its members to be missionary disciples of the Lord, proclaiming by their lives, the joy of the Gospel. Lord in your mercy

For those in formation for ordained ministry currently at seminary either in England or abroad – that they will be generous in their response to God's call to them.

Lord in your mercy

For those who suffer greatly because of their human right being abused, especially those killed in the Ukraine war – that the work of courageous men and women who risk their own lives to disclose these abuses will be successful. Lord in your mercy

For our children and young people – that they will receive from their parents and from this parish a sure grounding in the faith as they grow in their relationship with Jesus.

Lord in your mercy

For those who have died, all victims of violence, accident, natural disaster and the Covid 19 pandemic, for Noreen Clayton, Carol's mother who died last Sunday, Marie Clinch whose funeral takes place on Tuesday and Florence McDermott and Frederick Isaac Cox 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 together the Regina Coeli which you will find at the bottom of the back page of the Newsletter: **O Queen of heaven, rejoice, Alleluia! For he whom you did merit to bear, Alleluia! Has risen as he said, Alleluia! Pray for us to God, Alleluia! Rejoice and be glad O Virgin Mary, Alleluia! For the Lord has risen indeed, Alleluia.**

Celebrant:

Almighty and ever living God, bring us to the joy of your heavenly city; so that we, your little flock, may follow, where Christ, our Good Shepherd, has gone before us by the power of his resurrection. Through Christ our Lord. Amen