

## Homily 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter 2020

3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020

Acts 2.14,36-41. 1 Peter 2.20-25, John 10.1-10

### *The Good Shepherd leads us into abundant life.*

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“I have come that you may have life in all its fullness.”

This is such a key saying of Jesus, its one I'm especially aware of when baptising a young child. At that point, perhaps not long after a new life has been brought into the world, there is often such hope, expectation and desire for all that is good for the child.

Jesus does not say life in all its length, wealth, success, health and happiness – he uses the word *abundance*. It is not a phrase that excludes these things; a very long wealthy healthy and successful life in worldly terms may come our way. However, it is a phrase that should shape and haunt our attitude to all those things. If they are not marked by love, charity, forgiveness, humility and all the other kingdom values then they do not constitute abundant life in the eyes of Jesus.

Jesus is not just a teacher a rabbi he is a leader. In the Gospel of John the nature of that leadership: *who* is leading and to *where* is set out with astonishing grandeur alongside intimate beauty. The grandeur of the opening prologue – “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the word was God, .... And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us”. Therein is the start too of an astonishing intimacy; the drawing of blessed Mary and the beloved disciple into a new community from the agony of the cross, the heart piercing intimacy of the encounters with Peter not least the resurrection encounter – “do you love me?” really love me ... “then feed my sheep.”

The image of sheep and shepherds is a familiar and common one yet we are in danger of seeing it solely in a domestic intimate category – a lovely pastoral setting of the Jesus caring for me and you as his sheep. A familiar pastoral scene around our land at this time of the spring and lambing.

Such a picture is a tiny scratch upon one of the many surfaces of this Gospel view of Jesus the Good Shepherd.

“They know his voice they follow him” If there were any dogs around they would not be there to drive the sheep, they would be large and fierce to ward of predators such as wolves and the like not jolly collies to chase the sheep into the right pen. He leads and they follow; a very different image from our own day. They follow for safety, for pasture, for life.

They belong to him – so he lays down his life for them – he is not a hireling like most shepherds who would flee from danger. The hireling will think of themselves first Jesus does not. Even more contrastingly the thieves and robbers see the sheep only in terms of their profit, success, wealth – all for themselves. Jesus is quite different.

He is the fulfilment of the great biblical image of the true leader of Israel set out in Ezekial and Isaiah, the shepherd of the nation and world who suffers for their sake because they matter; who serves them and does not make them serve him. The image of the servant king and the Good Shepherd are expression for the Christ, the anointed one of God. He is not a true leader and shepherd who just happens to lay down his life for his people but rather he is the true ruler from God **because** he lays down his life for his people.

It was but a few weeks ago – on Good Friday - we read aloud the passion from John. It is not so much a story of what people do to Jesus as what he does for them. In yielding himself to death as the *passive lamb* he is at his most active in bringing the means of life fullness of life to his sheep. “It is finished” cries Jesus from the cross – so we pray and give thanks for **“the means of grace and hope of glory.”**

What does all this mean for us at this time and what are we to make of Jesus’s call and leadership into abundant life? I hear at the moment much on the radio about folk appreciating nature, about changed values arising from the constraints of our life. Some who are confined to cramped and challenging conditions are even invited to join in on tours of parks, country and wild scenes. As we consider the issues arising from our pandemic and coming out of lockdown our values will be tested. It is impossible in a short homily to reflect on all that is challenged by the Good Shepherd but it is worth carrying the words of Jesus - “abundant life” - with us and the image of the cross as we grapple with such weighty issues. What life is worth living and how is it achieved? True freedom and self-sacrifice are the currency of the Kingdom of God. In the Christian life we discover that in service there really is perfect freedom.

The apostles in the acts of the apostles, move from the fear and perplexity of that early resurrection experience to a growing confidence in the power of God in Christ Jesus to bring abundant life – their lives though will be shorter, poorer, and less successful in worldly terms, and yet they are remembered for eternity, they have riches beyond measure and we call them saints and heroes in the faith.

This coming week we will have opportunities; events and moments to reflect what abundant life may mean for us. They will undoubtedly include things denied us – the hug of the grandchild and embrace of friend. We may gaze at the birds and wild animals in a moment of reflection and joy and then also register that they may live but half the length of days of a captive counterpart but they are free.

This week we will celebrate, commemorate and mark the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Victory in Europe. The evil ideology of Naziism and totalitarianism which infected a great nation and the world like a virus was defeated. Freedom came at great cost. The leadership most valued on the battlefield and on the home front was not valued from afar but alongside. In the grandeur of the big names and big picture of the Second World War those most remembered may be small in worldly terms. Some of those who survived went on to make a great success of their lives and live long lives. However what marked them was a short time in history, where what mattered was distilled and writ large in their hearts – sacrifice, service, duty to others as seen in those close to them. Those that emerged from the concentration camps would use their freedom in a different way – not just for themselves. They would remember names ground to dust by the world in their lives saved. Those that had nothing of their loved ones but a medal of valour would count it beyond price – for it bought them their life yet to be lived.

The Good Shepherd is good because of Good Friday. He comes that we might have life in all its abundance, leads us not from afar but alongside us however difficult it may be. That is why we, alongside the apostles, may have confidence that through Baptism we have shared in His death and by hearing his voice and following his way may come to share in his resurrection and eternal life - in all its abundance.

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