

Sermon for Online Service: Pott Shrigley 3 May 2020

John 10.1-10 *The Good Shepherd.*

Jesus said, 'I am the Good Shepherd'. These words immediately conjure a peaceful and reassuring scene. Green fields, sunshine, new-born lambs, grazing sheep – a familiar sight if you live in or near Pott Shrigley. Perhaps for some of us, also, they conjure an image familiar from a thousand religious paintings: Jesus himself, calm features framed by long hair and beard, staff in hand, and a tiny lamb at his side – or even carried on his shoulder. Indeed, we may well be reminded of Jesus' own story of the lost sheep; the one who wandered off, only to be found by its shepherd and carried safely home.

There are times in life when we need such re-assurance and calm; reminders of the inner peace and tranquillity, the safety and security, which Jesus promises us. It's surely no coincidence that the 23rd Psalm, The Lord is my Shepherd, is often used at funerals, with its comforting image of the one who guides and guards us through life, leading us to green pastures and to still waters; the one whose rod and staff steer us even through the valley of the shadow of death itself.

And the Good Shepherd tells us he's not just here for the bad times, but for all times: he has come that we might have life: 'life in all its fullness'.

Here at Pott Shrigley we are blessed with a number of sheep farmers, caring for their flocks with considerable skill and commitment. Indeed, it is thanks to them that the wonderful sight of sheep and lambs graces our landscape. But they'd be the first to tell you it's not all peace and tranquillity. The recent lambing season has been a tough time for farmer and flock alike – it always is. Some lambs, and mothers, have been lost; to illness, to accident, to predators.

Read again through Jesus' words in John's Gospel, and that is not all sweetness and light, either. For every phrase describing the commitment, the care, of the Good Shepherd, there is also an opposing phrase describing very different, bad, shepherds.

'All who came before me are thieves and bandits'

'Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit'

'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy'

And Jesus also talks about shepherds who don't care about the sheep because they are hired: the flock doesn't belong to them.

So, who are these 'bad shepherds'? Who is Jesus talking about?

His first hearers would have instantly recognised that this is how the scriptures describe those leaders – be they kings, priests or prophets – who have cared only for themselves, and not for the people they were called to serve and to lead. That is what it means to be a bad shepherd – and, of course, religious and political leaders who mislead and exploit those for whom they are supposed to care are not confined to the pages of the Bible. Our history, and indeed the present day, holds many more examples.

Why did Jesus introduce this jarring note? Why re-assure and calm us with the image of the Good Shepherd, only to unsettle us with this talk of thieves and bandits, of bad shepherds?

He does it to warn us. If we are to know peace, security – indeed, 'life in all its fullness' – we need to make sure that we are putting our trust in, are following, the right shepherd: the Good Shepherd.

Some of those bad shepherds might make tempting offers, they might rattle the feed tin very loudly; they might use any number of ways to invite or force us into their sheepfolds. False religious leaders for instance often make very alluring claims, which can seem attractive compared with the sometimes difficult path the Christian is called upon to walk. But their offer is ultimately empty.

In the modern world it is not just religions which can hold out false promises. There is a widespread belief that we can find peace and fulfilment in any number of things: money, sex, possessions, popularity, success. None of these things are wrong in and of themselves: but it is not they who will bring us to a place of peace, tranquillity and security; there is only one shepherd who will do that. I hope that you will put your trust in the one and only Good Shepherd.

Of course, you might ask me, How we can be sure that he's the good one, and that those other so-called shepherds will ultimately cheat us? that he tells the truth while they tell lies? that he will deliver on his promises while they won't?

The proof is found in this, as Jesus states, and as we remembered only three weeks ago: The Good Shepherd is the one who lays down his life for his sheep.