

Suggested Address to be read out for Vocation Sunday 21st April 2024

Readings for Easter 4 Yr B : Psalm 23, (1 John 3: 16-24,) John 10: 11-18.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd – often with a lamb draped over his shoulders - was a popular picture in Sunday School prize books and Victorian Church Vestries. It has often been worked in embroidery alongside the words of the 23rd Psalm and reimagined in many different and thought provoking ways. I wonder what picture you have in your mind of the ‘Good Shepherd’? (*you might like to pause here so folk can think*)

In our agricultural County the bleating of sheep and lambs are a familiar sound at this time of the year. So too is the sound of the shepherd calling to their dog and herding, the often reluctant animals, from field to field. There are few natural predators of our Cumbrian sheep today.

However the sheep and lambs of Jesus day were in constant danger of wolves, bears and wild dogs. They were far more wary. They relied heavily on the protection of the shepherd. Each night they would be safely penned and guarded. They would need to hear and recognize their shepherd’s voice each morning and follow him out of the shelter to the fresh pasture of the day under his close protection.

Hearing the call of Jesus and responding is what makes it possible for us to flourish as Christians. In a sense this is our first and most fundamental calling; to come to know the love of Jesus and to acknowledge his authority in our lives. No other calling makes sense without this first one.

In this the picture of Jesus as the ‘Good Shepherd’ calling each of his sheep by name and leading them to fresh, nourishing pasture fits perfectly. He is the one who knows what is best for each in his charge and supplies it. He calls us individually, personally, and lead us to ‘life in all its fullness’. The life he says he came to bring. (John 10: 10)

Furthermore as the Good Shepherd he will protect his sheep from the dangers of the wolf and bear. He will save his followers from the forces that would damage and devour them. The decisions that result in spiritual death. So much so that He is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. Unlike the false shepherds, the hired hands who run away (John 10:12) Jesus will die to save his followers as he did on the Cross.

If we have responded to this first calling is there anything else?

Many followers of Jesus down the ages can attest to the truth that there certainly is more.

Once we are established followers of Jesus life throws up other crossroads. The question may come through a conversation or reading or when we are quietly praying. The sense that there is something else that God has for us. It is often centered on the question of what ‘life in all its fullness’ means for us. Our hearts might just sense that God has something that just makes us feel alive, more alive than anything else, and he wants to lead us into a new chapter in our lives; to have more of this. Its up to us to hear the call, respond and be willing to follow wherever we are led.

We might sense it in so many ways. For one person it might be when we are telling a story to a group of children, or for another, solving a difficult logistical problem or yet another reflecting on a conversation that somebody said really helped them. It will be a varied as there are people here today. However when the call comes you just know that God is nudging you to do what you are really passionate about for the sake of his Kingdom.

This is like a second deeper calling to be what the world needs so much; a Christian fully alive.

If God has spoken to you like this in the past and you have acted upon it, thank God.

If you have felt this more than once but for various reasons have not acted upon it – please speak to your local minister or contact one of the Vocations Team as soon as possible. The experience of many, many people down the ages is that when God calls he keeps calling until we remember that the Good Shepherd has authority over us – he is Lord - and he has a right to be obeyed because he did lay down his life for us. What is more – this is the way to life in all its fullness.

The range of callings is infinite. From school governance, to social enterprise volunteering, from accountant to nurse, from Pioneer Craft Leader to mountain pilgrim. From music ministry to administration ministry. From all forms of Lay Ministry to the ministry of the ordained. If you want to know more then do please look at the Carlisle Diocese Webpage under 'Vocations'. There is a range of information outlined there, but there is more. God is calling his people today, here in Cumbria to follow a ministry. You can also get in touch with a Vocations Coordinator – their details are on the website too. They will be pleased to speak with you and help you discern your calling and guide you along the way. They have been trained and experienced in this ministry.

The Good Shepherd calls each Christian by name.

The Good Shepherd leads his followers to good pasture and wholesome lives.

The Good Shepherd protects us all from the forces that would harm us.

The Good Shepherd knows the right way for his followers, and understands that they are willing to make sacrifices in following his example. Following your calling is the way to a life so full, so real, so amazing and so **GOOD**.

Please don't miss out.

Amen.