
Sunday 25th April – Fourth Sunday of Easter
Readings: Acts 4:5-12 & John 10:11-18

Acts 4:5-12

The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and others of the high priest's family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: 'By what power or what name did you do this?'

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: 'Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is

“the stone you builders rejected,
which has become the cornerstone.”

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

John 10:11-18

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.

Reflection

We all spent lockdown in different ways. Some people read incessantly, some people grew a garden, some of you became teachers! I confess to you now that I spent a disproportionate amount of time following the Instagram and social media accounts of shepherds. In the beginning it was just a distraction from the four walls of my flat – views of great Yorkshire vistas, or pictures of early morning misty sunrises over the garden of England when I couldn't sleep. But pretty soon I became obsessed with the life of the shepherd. From the brutal, raw beauty of lambing season, to gathering and herding, to hand rearing lambs and chasing foxes away from their flock.

Here's my big takeaway: Shepherding is a 365 days a year, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day kind of job. It's an up at all hours of the night kind of job, a hand to mouth kind of life, a blood, sweat and not a few too many tears kind of existence. A number of times I've read shepherds talk about their commitment to their work and their reticence to hire in help. Hired help is necessary sometimes for a busy season like lambing time but they won't be there through the long winter months, they won't be there for the long haul, they aren't invested in the same way. The very fact that there is so much at stake makes it hard for Shepherds to trust their livelihoods to other people.

We have a good shepherd who was not content to trust us into hired hands, who knew that whatever clever ways we devise as human beings to take care of ourselves, to build and grow and control things, we were ultimately incapable of saving our own lives. The temporal things of this world, however good they may be in of themselves, cannot save us. They may be with us for a season, but they have no power in the face of suffering, of unanswered questions, and most significantly they are no match for the depth of our sin. None of them has power, none of them can make us right, acceptable or give us peace with God. As Peter points out to the high priests in Acts 4, Jesus alone is the one who can save us.

We have a good shepherd who has not left us to the mercy of hired hands, but instead made himself like us, a vulnerable lamb, and gave himself up to the wolves that were really coming for *us*. He stands in the way, he lays down **his** life so that we might go out into good pasture.

He is the one whose voice we have been created to hear, the one who knows us, who we belong to. And on the cross he has shown his love for us; that there is nothing he wouldn't do for his flock, 365 days a year, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day... for all eternity.

Where this week might we turn our attention to the sound of his voice? Away from the fascination with the hired hands that can so easily lure us into feelings of safety and comfort but instead, might we surrender ourselves to the guidance of his rod and his staff and trust the sound of his voice; the good good shepherd, who knows your name and calls you to trust yourself afresh into his loving hand.

Ellie Hughes