

PRAYER

We thank you, Lord, our good shepherd and our Saviour,
that even when we go through the valley of darkness you are with us.
Even when we forget you, you do not forget us.
Even when we are divided among ourselves,
You remind us of our oneness in you.
Even when we are undeserving you hold nothing back.
We give you thanks with one voice and we praise you. **Amen**

AND NOW OUR PRAYERS OF CONFESSION WHERE WE SAY “SORRY” TO GOD

Forgive us, Lord
When we exclude those you have called into your fold:
Those on the fringes,
Those we are uncomfortable with,
Those of differing lifestyles and faiths.
Help us to speak with the voice of the good shepherd,
Calling all to a place of safety,
To a relationship of trust and a common identity in your name,
Celebrating diversity and bound by your love. **Amen**

BIBLE READING: JOHN 10: 11-18

SERMON

I could sum up in a few sentences today's Bible reading: Jesus identified himself as the good shepherd who knows his sheep (that is every person on this earth) and would lay down his life for them. Jesus did indeed lay down his life through crucifixion and by making the ultimate sacrifice showed how much he cared for each and every one of us. We shall have a further look at Jesus' powerful words later in this sermon.

One thing I do miss about 'physical' services in the church is 'audience' participation, yes, that time when the preacher asks the congregation a question! It's difficult to get responses over ZOOM, or if you are reading a copy of this talk you would have to contact me by another means of communication, but one question I would like you to consider is 'what are the personality traits of sheep'?

You may describe sheep as being 'skittish'; 'excitable'; 'nervous'; 'easily scared'; 'helpless'; 'stupid'. These assumptions of sheep could be confirmed in our Bible reading today in verse 12 Jesus states:

"The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it".

Without the guidance and alleged protection of the hired hand the sheep are exposed to danger, the wolf is among them, the flock of sheep panic and with no-one to care for them they become 'directionless' and scatter. The hired hand is only interested in his wages, not the sheep themselves and some Bible commentaries compare the 'hired hand' to the religious authorities of the time, whose interest was power and self-service rather than God's people and service to God. Jesus Christ is the good shepherd and like any good shepherd his interests are in his sheep, enabling them to have life to the full. Earlier on in the Bible, John chapter 1 verses 4 and 5, the passage reads:

'In him was life, and that light was the life of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it'.

Jesus is the guiding light for his people ensuring that we are not 'directionless' and by following that light there is wonderful hope for all humanity and God's creation.

There are many other answers that I'm sure we could think of with regard to the personality traits of sheep, but sheep are actually surprisingly intelligent with impressive memory and recognition skills. Sheep have also been described as 'sociable' and 'complex' words that can be assigned to humans, so Jesus' comparison with sheep to the human race as his 'flock' is very accurate.

Another expression that is often linked to sheep and other animals is the term 'going astray' meaning that they wander off the right path leading them into danger. When applied to a person the term 'going astray' or 'being led astray' sounds, sometimes correctly, judgemental as if that person has done something wrong, for example, 'the boy was led astray by bad company'. However, we can all go astray through no fault of our own of which there are also many examples; we may know a certain direction or path in life that we want to stay on, but life can have a nasty

habit of knocking us off that path. We can't always plan for the 'unexpected' and sometimes the trust we place in people or material objects can let us down leaving us confused and lost as to what to do with our plans jeopardised and sometimes ruined leading us to varying degrees of vulnerability.

Many years ago I took 'A' level Geography at college and on one field trip to the Duddon Valley in the Lake District I was entrusted with map reading. The destination was a hillock probably a mile or so away that my two friends and I could see in the misty distance through the fine rain that was falling. Our objective was to measure the undulations of the terrain, using a variety of technical instruments, from our starting point to the hillock noting any unusual features along the way.

Well, the fields that we were walking through were challenging to say the least! Boggy, sometimes ankle deep in mud and water, over terrain that was very unforgiving and having to climb over and under barbed wire fences we made very slow progress. We eventually arrived at the hillock wet, cold and not looking forward to our return journey back the same way....and then I looked up from the map and in the distance I spotted a similar looking mound; I checked the map again and realised that there was a 99.99 % chance that we'd walked to the wrong hillock.

I announced to my two friends that we'd, or should I say I'd, made a mistake and had walked to the wrong place and on seeing my friends' faces declared that I was only 'joking'. One of my friends was a Christian, but the words he was about to utter may not have been biblically correct.

I didn't mean to lead my friends astray, it was a genuine error, and my friends had, albeit misguidedly, entrusted me with a map. We had strayed off the right path, it was my fault, and although we'd reached the wrong destination we were still able to produce good results through our observations that we presented to our lecturers.

We can't be perfect all the time, there is a saying 'to err is human...' from a poem by Alexander Pope meaning that it is natural for a human being to make mistakes or sometimes go astray. Jesus is the good shepherd who we can trust to put us back on the right path, to help us when we are lost and bring us back sometimes from the brink of despair and

danger. There will be bogs and mud to wade through and barbed wire fences to climb over on life's journey, but Jesus still shines that light through the darkness leading us onward to our correct destination. There is no need for a map, Jesus is the way!

Referring back to today's Bible reading in verse 16 Jesus reminds us that he has not forgotten those people who haven't 'seen the light', who are not yet part of his flock, laying down a challenge for himself:

"I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also".

If we change a few of the words to verse 16 it would lay down a challenge for us all:

'There are other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. We must bring them also; we must bring them also'.

That is our challenge, to show the love of God through our actions, words and deeds. Not only should we show love to each other within our church membership and to help each other when we stray off the path or are finding life difficult, but also to show the love of God outside our church walls to those who have strayed from a path of light. Jesus, the good shepherd, laid down his life for each and every one of us. **Amen.**

PRAYER

Jesus, good shepherd, we bring to you in our prayers
Those at the mercy of the wolves of violence and abuse;
Those scattered by prejudice and persecution;
Those harried by the pressures of life and their responsibilities to others;
Those who feel abandoned by their families and friends;
Those robbed of the fullness of life by illness, by poverty, by fear;
Those who feel excluded from the sheepfold of church or society,
Those on the fringes of our communities.
Jesus, good shepherd, unite us, inspire us and use us to draw others to your love. **Amen**

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