

25 April 2021

St Brandon's

Acts 4: 5-12; John 10: 11-18

Holy Spirit come now and inspire my words, open our hearts to hear you and set us free to live for you. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Jerusalem was busy and the temple crowded.

Annas and his son in law Caiaphas, high priests, are deep in conversation...

Who do they think they are? Stirring up the crowd. Wandering into the temple and doing so-called miracles, without our permission. Ignoring the guards, presuming to teach; they're just uneducated northerners...

Arrest and imprisonment is the only way to keep these madmen quiet. A familiar story perhaps, but who is on trial now?

Not long ago in Jerusalem it was Jesus- now it's Peter and John. These two have been here before, on a dark and dangerous night in the high priests' courtyard.

Last time, Peter crumbled at the questions of a serving girl, denied three times that he knew Jesus, the prisoner on trial inside.

This time, he shows no fear, but answers the High Priest with clarity and confidence.

For Peter is transformed: he now *knows* that Jesus is the Messiah, Saviour of the world.

He's got it now, the truth of who Jesus is and why he has come, the truth he blurted out along the way when they travelled with Jesus, but couldn't fully understand until after the resurrection.

The truth that Jesus, Good Shepherd of God's people, is the Good Shepherd for the whole world, has laid down his life to save the human race, and taken it up when he rose from death,

so that all who believe may have eternal life through him....

The journey has been deeply personal for Peter, who fled and unlike John, wasn't there at the crucifixion.

Yet they both ran to the tomb on Easter morning;

they were both there when the risen Jesus appeared in the locked upper room, and at the lake when Peter, feeling lost and guilty, had gone back to his fishing...

It was on that same morning that Jesus took a walk with Peter and challenged him, three times, to confess his love and continue the Good Shepherd's work- feed my sheep, tend my lambs, feed my sheep...

Peter's three positive replies cancelled out his three denials, and Jesus's forgiveness released him to live with new purpose and power, ready to receive God's power at Pentecost.

Peter has been transformed.

In today's Acts reading we see he's been feeding the flock of God's people who come to the Temple to worship, by preaching and demonstrating, in word and deed, the truth about Jesus, the Good Shepherd..

Just as Jesus himself fed 5000 people with bread and fish on a Galilean hillside, here in the Temple 5000 people take Peter's words, the bread of life, and believe in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Peter has become a Shepherd, a pastor, just as Jesus commissioned him to be.

Reading today's two passages from the New Testament, along with Psalm 23, is a powerful combination on a Sunday morning, especially when we are holding our annual meeting immediately after this service.

Often, and rightly, we view God as our shepherd, and Jesus as the Good Shepherd, from a personal perspective. Each of us is God's sheep, in need of care, guidance, food and protection. We are known by name, able to hear the Shepherd's voice personally, and he also calls us individually to become part of one great flock, his church.

And there's more. You and I are also called, like Peter to be shepherds, the Good Shepherd's assistants, learning from him and doing his work, his way.

We can only do this through the guidance and power of His Spirit living within us, but when we do so, it will follow that other sheep are gathered into the flock to meet Jesus.

Our life together, our way of being church must have the characteristics of the Good Shepherd, *not* the hired hand we heard about in the gospel reading. I'll say a little more about this in the Annual Meeting, in response to the group reports.

For now, I offer you two images of shepherds, both fairly local to us.

You may have seen the Yorkshire Farm programme on TV, about a family in Ravenstonedale, high in the Pennines. They have 9 children, yes nine, all of whom play their part in running the farm, learning as they grow, from one another.

This week, young Sidney, 8, was shown learning to be a shepherd. His parents had given him a sheepdog puppy, Floss, to feed, exercise and train. Sid brings Floss to meet a small group of sheep for the first time, his father on hand to watch and guide. They do really well, and Sid's father encourages him, then shows him the next stage of Floss's training as Sid

watches, followed by more praise for the excellent job Sid is doing with his puppy. The final shot is of Sid and Floss walking contentedly back to the farmhouse, Sid praising Floss and looking ten feet tall.

Yes I know it's feel-good tv, but I loved this, with all it shows us about how people can grow, like young Sid, step by step, through being enabled, trusted, stretched a bit, guided and affirmed.

The Lord our Shepherd does that for us too
as we learn to be shepherds to his flock,
and he asks us to do it for each other too.

I pray that St Brandon's may more and more be a church where people grow into the ministries God gives them.

This includes what we do 24/7, outside the church and in it. It includes paid jobs and voluntary roles, things we've been doing for years and those we've never dreamt of before, stillness and prayer as well as activity and rotas. It includes every member, from the oldest to the youngest, having a sense of their value and their place in this church, as a precious sheep in the flock, known by name, and as someone who can both receive and give, using what God has given them.

My second picture is of St Cuthbert, not surprisingly here in Durham. This young shepherd boy saw angels carrying St Aidan to heaven on the night he died, and sensed that God had a purpose for him too.

I pray for that vision and inspiration here, to sense God's purposes for us, individually and together, in the coming weeks, months and years.

I close with an adaptation of St Cuthbert's collect:

God our Father,
who called your servant Cuthbert
from following the flock to follow your Son
and be a shepherd of your people:
in your love and mercy help us to follow his example, to be good shepherds
who do your work, your way,
to make St Brandon's a community of safety and care for all, and to bring the lost home to
your fold. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd. Amen