

Easter 4 - Reflection by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”

If every Sunday had a title or theme then the 4th Sunday of Easter would surely be “Shepherd Sunday”, as we are encouraged to reflect on Jesus not just as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world but also as the Good Shepherd of his people.

In the 1st century being a shepherd was often a harsh and challenging way of life. Leading the flock to fresh water and grazing each day was a task that could mean traveling considerable distances, especially in the summer months, as the grazing became dry and parched. It was also a way of life that led to a close bond between the shepherd and the sheep; the shepherd leading, knowing the sheep, and they, in turn, recognising the shepherd’s voice and responding to his voice. It’s an image that can still be seen today in Mediterranean countries - a shepherd leading their sheep.

Jesus said *“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.”*

This is one of those beautiful biblical images from which we can take encouragement and comfort, not least in times of darkness and struggle; times when we think we have lost our way.

Not only does the Good Shepherd know each of the sheep, recognizing each one, but each is precious to the shepherd, who is also willing to protect them; the love of God committed to the preservation of the flock – you and me.

What we are reflecting on here is a gospel message that should fill us with joy and thanksgiving; the Good Shepherd giving everything to safeguard his sheep. Nothing is held back. The shepherd is the one who has laid down his life for his sheep and, having won that victory is not going to allow anyone to take the sheep away from his care.

Often we speak of Christ dying for the salvation of the world. Here the image is much more intimate, much more individual; from that we can take strength. As John Newton wrote in his hymn - “Amazing grace that saved a wretch like me”.

Flip the coin so to speak, and what is the sheep's response to the Shepherd?

I don't know how you are with cashpoint machines; do you use them all the time or refuse to go near them? For understandable security reasons they need to recognize both you and your card before allowing you to proceed. In goes the card and the next thing the machine asks for is your pin and, if the two match, then away you go with whatever transaction it is.

The times I find frustrating is when the cash machine refuses to recognize you. You enter what you are sure is your pin but the machine will not accept it. Three tries and then it won't even talk to you, refusing to give back your card, and the hassle of getting the card unlocked begins.

Recognition is important; we understand that in terms of banking or security. It is also important in spiritual terms: that we recognize who Christ is, not just in an academic sense, but that we hear his call to us and respond to that call, accepting the way he leads, whatever that may be.

When was the last time you heard the Shepherds call? So often in our prayers and our devotions, we are busy doing, busy speaking, busy even with the clutter of the day. We fail to hear the shepherds call. We begin to wander off, only for the shepherd to have to drag us back. What we need to learn to do is recognize his call in the stillness of prayer, through scripture, through those who are around us prompting and prodding.

The image of the Shepherd and his sheep is one of care, devotion, intimacy, recognition and response. Does that reflect our relationship with Christ?

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