

## **Reflection for Easter 4 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last**

Earlier this week I was with Bishop Mark on a diocesan trip to St Maelrubha's Poolewe on the west coast. It is a small church that was formally a bothy: it still has a field directly behind and in that field were several ewes and their lambs. There, too, was the bishop in the car park with his crozier, the sheep behind him. The image of the shepherd and the flock. (Sadly, I did not manage to get a picture)

Similarly focus your attention for a moment on the central panel of the window over the altar here in Holy Trinity Keith. The image of Christ as the Good Shepherd - crook in one hand and lamb in the other. *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.* The image of the shepherd and the sheep is one that comes up repeatedly in the pages of scripture in both the Old and New Testaments.

The most well-known of all the Psalms is Psalm 23

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.*

There is another Old Testament example found in Ezekiel.

*"I, the Sovereign LORD, tell you that I myself will look for my sheep and take care of them in the same way as shepherds take care of their sheep that were scattered and are brought together again. ... I will lead them back to the mountains and the streams of Israel and will feed them in pleasant pastures."*

At times maybe we have over romanticized the image of a shepherd and the sheep. Look again at that window and the clothing the artist has given to Jesus. It is almost as if he is attired in his Sunday best, so to speak. I cannot imagine many a working shepherd dressed like that. Wherever you are in the world being a shepherd is not an easy way of life, especially at lambing season. In the Middle East at the time of Jesus it could be not only hard work, but also dangerous, leading the sheep to grazing, and protecting them from predators of differing kinds. On this Shepherd Sunday, because that is what Easter 4 is, let us reflect on the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

Firstly, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

As I have said shepherds in the Holy Land not only cared for their sheep but also had to lead them from one piece of grazing to another. The shepherd is on the move all the time: in the spring after the winter rains staying closer to home but as the heat gradually dried the grass travelling further for water and grazing. As the shepherd travels, so too the flock increasingly needs protection as well. He needs not only to keep the flock together but also to protect them from danger, involving concern and a sacrificial attitude.

In his gospel, John compares the good shepherd with a hired one. The hired hand may not be a brigand out to destroy the sheep but when things get difficult the hired hand is more concerned with their own welfare than that of the sheep. If it is a toss-up between the hired hand or the sheep, the sheep do not come first. Whereas as the shepherd who owns the flock is prepared to go that one step further – his priority is the sheep.

The image of the Good Shepherd – giving his life for the sheep - is the image of the cross.

Look again at that window and the figures on each side. We could debate who they are representing. If the one with the stone tablets is Moses, then the other could be Elijah. It is like the transfiguration when Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah about the way ahead - the way of the cross.

We are God's sheep: we stray away, we get lost and yet Jesus is always there to pick us up regardless of the cost.

Secondly, *I know my sheep and they know me.*

The relationship between the shepherd and the sheep is not one of distance - not one of the sheep simply being an impersonal number; rather, it's an intimate relationship, based on intimate knowledge - the shepherd knowing each sheep and the sheep likewise knowing the shepherd. *"He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice."*

That should mirror our relationship with God - one that is built on something that is personal and intimate. Look at the gospel stories and so often it is as Jesus comes close to people, touching them with his love that change happens. Think of Zacchaeus the tax collector from Jericho. His life is turned around by a relationship with Jesus as he is called by name. Or the Samaritan women by the well - Jesus' knowledge of her and of her past was what touched her. This is the same sort of living relationship that all Christians should have with God. He knows his sheep, he has saved his sheep, he calls each by name.

The idea of knowing and being known does not stop with our own relationship with God, it also lies at the heart of much of the church activity. We, as members of the body of Christ, walk alongside each other through the ups and downs of life. We walk alongside our communities while seeking to minister to them. This is only possible if we know each other and our communities.

Thirdly *"I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."*

Today we have a group service, five Churches coming together as one - one flock. At times we all naturally focus on our own little world, our own church. What we need to be reminded of is the wider church our own diocese and Province - the wider Anglican communion. I know from my own experience in the Church of England that the SEC is a mystery to those in England. But it is wider than that. Different denominations and different countries, each with their own characteristics and traditions, yet they are all part of the one flock with one shepherd.

How do we support and encourage the wider church?

It is exactly this point that John is making as he talks of the Good Shepherd having more than one flock. To the Jews, Israel was God's flock and they looked no further. Now Jesus is preparing to send his disciples to bring in Gentiles as well - so that they shall be one.

As we live in our small corner of the Shepherd's field it is all too easy for our churches to become inward looking. Let us remember the wider picture. In a moment we say the creed - *We believe in one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church*. Let's not only say the words but also pray for the wider church as well.

The image of the Good Shepherd -

the one who is willing to die for the sheep

the one who knows his sheep and whose sheep know him

the one who draws all his sheep to him to become one flock with one shepherd.

Look again at that window - this is our shepherd - the Good Shepherd.