

John 10:1-10; Acts 2:42-47

07.05.17

### *The Shepherd and his flock*

Our reading from John's gospel this morning takes as its starting point the image of Jesus as Shepherd, building up to verse 11 where he says 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep'. And it's interesting to pair this passage with our other reading this morning from the Book of Acts, for between the two of them they offer us two important aspects of what it means to be a Christian.

First, then, we read of this good Shepherd that 'He calls his own sheep by name...' Jesus is referring here to that most deep and intimate relationship between him and each of us whereby we are named by him. And coming so soon after Easter, when we hear that our thoughts go to the story of Jesus' resurrection, where he appears to his beloved follower Mary Magdalene who has come to his tomb to anoint his body. She is blinded by grief and does not recognise him, thinking that he is the gardener – until, that is, the moment when he speaks her name. 'Mary', he says, and at once she recognises him, reaching out to him. That one word, 'Mary', her name, speaks volumes of the close and intimate relationship he had with her – and so too with us.

The shepherd image, however, is interesting insofar as it combines tenderness with toughness, and we recognise that sheep can at times be stubborn and difficult and the shepherd must at times be rough with them. And so as Christians we become aware of this mysterious presence in our lives, this strange, intimate relationship with one who keeps pace with us and speaks our name – but that is a presence that is not always comfortable, perhaps not even always welcome. And in this short meditation this morning all I can do is ask you to reflect on what it might mean to you for Jesus to know your name, to speak your name this morning. He has your well-being at heart. He is not like the thief or the bandit who comes to a harm you – and who knows what thieves or bandits might be threatening you today? But what does it mean for the good shepherd to speak your name with all his tenderness and toughness?

But then of course the shepherd has a flock and we are reminded that being a Christian is not just about me and God, for we meet God in a community. And we find in our verses from the Book of Acts this morning a beautiful picture of this community – of people worshiping together and gathering together round God's Word. And they care for one another and share

their possessions, and they discover God in their midst as they break bread together. And day by day God adds to their number. And there is something so vulnerable about that little community, set in Jerusalem where there are thieves and bandits who would do them harm – as the religious authorities will soon conspire to destroy them. And we think of the history of that community, of how from vulnerability and persecution it went on to become a great power on earth with Popes and great worldly wealth. And then it became a lair of thieves and bandits, corrupt and distorted and oppressive. And this year – and at the end of this service – we will recall how five hundred years ago a great movement began to reform Christ's church, to renew it. And of course reform is not something that takes place once for we are stubborn sheep and we are constantly led astray. And one of the great watchwords of the Reformation was the Latin phrase 'semper reformanda' – always reforming, always changing, always being renewed by the Spirit of God as we meet new challenges and we keep pace with a changing world. And that requires courage and imagination.

There are times however, when it is good to be reminded of the simple, unchanging essence of the church – to recall who and what we are at heart. And in this changing and complex world our passages today speak with such simplicity. Here, in the church, we meet Jesus, our shepherd, who calls each of us by name. And we gather around God's Word and break bread together, and we care for one another and for the world around us. And to what end? For what purpose? Well, our reading from John ends with those great words, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' That is what it's all about at the end of the day. That's God's goal for us and for the world. That's God's vision: that all may have life and have it abundantly. May God grant us grace to live this out, to whom be the praise and glory forever. Amen.