



Worship from home

Sermon – Sunday 3 May 2020

Those of you on Tonbridge Road Methodist Church's WhatsApp group will have seen a video that was posted a few days ago about animals that are reclaiming the world while humans are in lockdown. It showed sheep enjoying themselves on a merry-go-round in Raglan and lions lording it over a golf course in South Africa. (I certainly wouldn't want to be the first golfer back on that particular course when lockdown finishes.)

The environmental impact of lockdown is one of the positive side-effects of a terrible crisis. Pollution in some cities is down by 50%. Many people have told me that they can hear the birds for the first time in years, and that they've begun appreciating nature in their local area all the more, whether it's in their garden (if they're lucky enough to have one) or on their daily exercise.

Under normal circumstances, those of us who move between home and work and school, often in cars, don't spend as much time enjoying nature as we'd like, and so some of the imagery in the Bible can seem rather distant. Like today's readings, which focus on sheep and shepherds. If we're not careful, it's easy to idealise the life of a shepherd, until the image in our mind's eye when we read these two passages looks something like a cross between Dr Dolittle and Maria Von Trapp skipping over the alps.

But what is it that these readings are trying to tell us about God – and the way God loves us? What was Jesus trying to say to the Pharisees who, just before this passage in John's Gospel, couldn't bring themselves to believe that Jesus had opened the eyes of a man born blind?

Over and over again in the Gospels, we hear people ask of Jesus: 'Who is this man?' Who is this man, who can open the eyes of the blind? Who is this man, that even the wind and the waves obey him? Who is this man, who has the power to forgive sins? Later in chapter 10, the Jewish people gathered in the temple in Jerusalem demand a straight answer from Jesus: 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' But Jesus cannot give a simple 'yes,' because that would mean saying yes to their idea of what the Messiah should be and do. In the passage we heard, Jesus instead offers his listeners a set of images. He is the gate for the sheep. He is the good shepherd. Yes, he is the Messiah – but not in the form they were expecting. This Messiah will get his hands dirty. This Messiah will lay down his life for the sheep. This shepherd will die for the sheep, not because the sheep have asked him to, but simply out of love for them. For us.

Many of us in recent weeks have been standing on our doorsteps on Thursday evenings and clapping or banging saucepan lids to show our appreciation for NHS staff and other

keyworkers. As well as lions on golf courses, one of the blessings to come out of this difficult time has been a real sense of appreciation of those whose work requires them to put their health and even their lives on the line for the benefit of strangers. In the current crisis, that's not just healthcare workers, but delivery drivers, funeral directors, retail staff, and countless others. I hope and pray that when we find our new normal, whatever that might look like, we will emerge as a more appreciative society – that even if we don't carry on clapping on our doorsteps, we might find other ways to show our gratitude for those who make sacrifices in their line of work for the benefit of others. That might mean hanging up the phone and smiling at the person serving you in the supermarket. It might mean leaving out a gift for the person who delivers your milk. It might mean doing more research before we vote into how the candidates plan to support the NHS, or teachers, or the homelessness sector.

As a society, we have been moved by the sacrifices that so many have made. On Tuesday at 11am, many people paused for a minute to remember over 100 NHS staff and care workers who have died from COVID-19, and to honour their sacrifice.

And this – this is the kind of love the good shepherd has for us. Not an easy, cheap sort of love. But the costly kind of love that means laying down his life for the sheep. For us. And that's the first message I hope we will take from these two readings. Whoever you are, and whatever you have done, Jesus loves you so much that he laid down his life for you.

But as the Psalmist reminds us, God's love for us doesn't begin and end with the cross. It wasn't a one-off event. Jesus promised to be with us always, to the end of the age. And I think that's part of the appeal of Psalm 23. Those of you who, like me, have been binge-watching the Vicar of Dibley since it appeared on Netflix have been hearing the words of this psalm every time the theme tune plays. Many of you will have heard this psalm read at weddings and funerals – there's something special about it that means we reach for it at moments of celebration and desolation. It manages to take in those moments when we find ourselves in green pastures, feeling refreshed and restored – but also those times when we find ourselves in the darkest of valleys. For some of you, lockdown will have felt more like a green pasture – a time when you can rest, learn a new skill, read a book, enjoy the garden. For many of you, it may well have felt like walking through the valley – if home-schooling is proving impossible, if you're among the thousands of people whose income has been affected, if you or a loved one has been ill, if you're bored and frustrated at home. I imagine, for many of us, the past few weeks have included moments when we've found ourselves in green pastures and moments when we've been in the darkest of valleys. The enduring strength of Psalm 23 is that it reminds us that God is with us in both places. That he leads us into spaces where we can rest and be refreshed, and that he does not abandon us in the valley. Robert, last week, quoted John Wesley's last words: 'Best of all is – God is with us.' Ian Adams calls Psalm 23 'a strong psalm for lean times... that takes seriously the reality that life is often demanding. Wilderness and shadow, valley and trouble are common human experiences faced by us all. But the psalm also suggests that this harsh reality is, in God's care, neither the only truth nor the last word.' Because God is with us, the dark valley may in time reveal itself to be a place of restoration. And that's the second message I take from these readings – that the good shepherd never abandons his sheep. That he's with us in the green

pastures and the dark valleys, and that by his presence, even the darkest valley might become a place of transformation.

The good shepherd loves us so much that he lays down his life for us. He loves us so much that he stays with us no matter what. Words of comfort in these difficult times. But these readings contain a word of challenge, too. Kenneth Grayston insists that anyone reading this passage from John 10 should first have to read – preferably out loud – Ezekiel 34. I won't read the entire chapter, you'll be pleased to hear, but this gives you a flavour:

“The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd.”

Ezekiel was called to prophesy against the rulers and kings of Israel because they had failed to take care of the sheep, the people of Israel. They had looked after themselves and ignored the needs of the vulnerable. In John 10, talking to the Pharisees, Jesus talks about the thieves and bandits who come to steal and kill and destroy the sheep. Sometimes, we think of ourselves only as the sheep in these passages. But there are very real ways in which we are shepherds, too. All of us have an impact on the lives of those around us, and the lives of those we will never meet, but who are affected by the clothes we buy, the food we eat, the carbon emissions we create. Some of you will have seen Rowan Williams on Newsnight speaking about how this virus has created a powerful reminder of how our health and wellbeing is bound up with the health and wellbeing of every single human being. We have a responsibility to use the power we have to ensure that justice is done. To ensure that other people have life in all its fullness. Whether that's the people who make our clothes, who staff our health service, who live next door and might need someone to pick up their prescription. After all, we follow in the footsteps of the one who was willing to lay down his life for the sheep. How might we follow his example?

Jesus, the good shepherd, loves you so much that he laid down his life for you. He has promised never to leave you, whether you're having a great time, or whether you're walking through the valley. Because he laid down his life, the valley is neither the only truth nor the last word. And just as we line our streets to show our gratitude to those who put their lives on the line in the NHS, we are called to offer ourselves in gratitude to the good shepherd, by doing our best to ensure that those around us have life in all its fullness.

We do not know what the future holds. But the best thing of all is, God will be with us. Surely, goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord. Amen.

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