

May 3rd 2020 Sermon for 4th Sunday of Easter –

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**Collect for 4th Sunday of Easter**

Risen Christ, faithful shepherd of your Father's sheep;  
Teach us to hear your voice and to follow your command,  
That all your people may be gathered into one flock,  
To the glory of God the Father. Amen

**Bible Reading** Acts 2:42 - end

**Gospel Reading** John 10:1-10

May I speak to you now in the name of the living God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Those of us with gardens are appreciating how fortunate we are to have them. If you are like me then you will delight in the frequent visitors to our gardens. I have a family of blue tits nesting in one of the bushes. I have a robin who hangs around even as I'm doing my daily exercise. There are others magpies, blackbirds, pigeons and more. I am also visited by a fine looking fox. Now imagine my delight the other day when the fox was standing at the bottom of my garden, very alert, very attentive. And then I noticed next to the fox was a tiny little fox cub. And since it was sticking very close to mum, I rather suspect it was its first outing into the big wide world. And for a moment it stood there, wide eyed, looking at the wonder of this great big new world out there. Inevitably it got me thinking about life after lockdown. As the fox cub left the security of the den, so at some point I will leave the security of home. It will be great to see and experience things that have been absent over these past few weeks. Despite the wonders of zoom and skype it will be wonderful to see those who we love. We look forward to new beginnings, to greater freedom, and the greater enjoyment and fullness of life.

In our reading for today, we may be left pondering on what Jesus is saying and in particular that last sentence "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Somehow with the spectre of coronavirus there is something about this sentence that resonates more keenly with us. What does Jesus mean when he says "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." We may be forgiven for thinking that life in all its fulness can only be found in heaven and is beyond this world. That may be true to some extent. But as we experience the constraints of lockdown, we are only too aware of things missing in life. Things that bring enjoyment and satisfaction and fulfilment. If that is the case, then maybe there is also a case for saying that even in normal circumstances, there could be more to life. I think it is very much the case that Jesus is offering more in the here and now as well as sometime in the future beyond this world.

Earlier in St John's Gospel Jesus has a conversation with one of the Pharisees, a man named Nicodemus. Now the Pharisees were what we might call the religious elite, learned leaders, and who had a very legalistic way of interpreting God's Law. Often they are portrayed as being spiritually blind and as such are often seen as being opposed to Jesus' teaching, especially when it comes to grace, mercy and forgiveness. And the freedom that God wishes us to have in life. I think Nicodemus however, was more of a friend than a foe to Jesus. Certainly he engages with Jesus in this conversation. Jesus said to him 'that to enter the kingdom of heaven, that is God's kingdom, you must be born again'. Nicodemus is puzzled by this statement and he asks 'but can someone enter a second time in their mother's womb?' We of course have interpreted the concept of 'being born again' as meaning starting over again, in terms of our baptism at the beginning of our spiritual journey with God, the start of a new life with God. We talk about dying to sin, and the old life, in order to live with Christ in his risen life, having been immersed in water, or having water poured over the baby's head. It symbolises not only cleansing and new life but also death and drowning and the end of the old life of sin. That said I don't think Nicodemus was entirely wrong to ask how can someone be born again and someone enter the womb a second time. It seems to me that often or not new life comes out of a place of confinement. The baby indeed comes out of the womb. The fox cub emerges from the den.

I've been reflecting a lot on how many of God's people in the Bible experience imprisonment or confinement or some other disruption to their life. And yet out of that experience God does something remarkable and something new and transformative happens. And perhaps most crucial of all is the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is nailed to the cross and he dies, he is buried in a tomb. And yet out of the confinement of the grave comes resurrection, new life. Returning to our reading today and particularly that last sentence 'the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full'. As we live with the constant threat of coronavirus we can perhaps see the thief at work. Every day we listen to the News and we hear the latest count. Each one in that number represents another life lost, a human being; a father, a mother, grandparent, brother, sister, husband, wife, son, daughter. And tragically many of them have died alone with those closest to them being absent. It is a dark and distressing time.

Ultimately death is the absence of God. And with the absence of God, there is no love, no hope, no future, no life. Fundamentally the big statement Jesus is making about himself when he says 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full'. Is that he is the Son of God. And being the Son of God, his presence in the world brings hope, brings forgiveness, brings love, brings a promise, brings a future, it brings life and life in all its fullness. In our reading today Jesus relates himself to the role of the shepherd. There are many times in the Gospel that Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

One of the most familiar passages in the whole of the Bible is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. It begins "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." The Psalm writer is describing God and in describing God, he is also describing Jesus. A God who loves us and a God who takes care of us. The words of the Psalm are a great comfort to us, especially in times of sorrow and loss. It is why this Psalm is often read at funerals. Very often what tugs at our heart strings is the line that says "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will

fear no evil for you are with me". Note this is translated the valley of the **shadow** of death, or sometimes simply the darkest valley. If Jesus is with us, as I have already said, there is hope, there is promise, there is future, there is life. It may be a tough time. It may be fearful. It may have terrible consequences. But it is only the shadow of the real thing. With Jesus there is hope, for he is the one who has conquered death. Out of the tomb he rises, a new dawn, a new day, a new creation, a new life. We talk about light at the end of the tunnel. Jesus is that light, a light that can never be extinguished. He has a victory over death.

The Psalm goes on "even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." If I'm honest with you, I never knew how a rod and staff could bring comfort until it was explained to me. Being a shepherd in the Middle East is very different to our experiences here in the UK. In the Middle East it is a very hot arid environment and a shepherd would constantly be leading his flock to more patches of grass where they could feed and water where they could drink. It is invariably a wild, hostile environment. And so at night time the shepherd would make a makeshift enclosure so that the sheep would be safe. He would put fencing around where the sheep would sleep and he would guard the entrance. When morning came the shepherd would let the sheep out one by one. He would put the rod across the entrance to stop the sheep so that he could examine them one by one. And if the sheep was injured in any way he would pull the sheep out with his staff or his crook and then bind up the wounds. When understood in this context we can see exactly why the rod and staff bring comfort. It is Jesus the Good Shepherd who heals, who protects, who provides hope and offers life. The devil or the thief on the other hand comes to destroy life.

There will come a day when our confinement in lockdown is over. And we will be able to leave our homes, these places of relative safety, our sheep pens if you like. But the question is whose voice will you listen to? If we listen to what the world is saying it is all about the number of people who have died, it speaks of neglect and incompetence. It talks of chaos and confusion, desperation and tragedy. And there is of course some truth. It is an absolute tragedy and its terrifying. But there is another voice, a voice that speaks of transformation, of hope, of generosity, of kindness, of love, of peace. And speaks about future. It speaks of healing and restoration.

"One who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.....the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full".

Listen therefore to the voice of the Good Shepherd and follow Him for He is The Way, The Truth and The Life. Amen.