

Merrylea Parish Church, Glasgow.

Pastoral Homily by the Locum, the Revd Jim Gibson

Sunday, 3rd May 2020

Third Sunday after Easter.

Jesus said again, "I am telling you the truth: I am the gate for the sheep. All others who came before me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever comes in by me will be saved; he will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only in order to steal, kill and destroy. I am come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness. I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for his sheep."

(St. John 10: 7-11).

Before this pandemic, did you actually know what an epidemiologist is?

Two such experts have recently made the news. First up was the Swedish professor Johan Giesecke. He horrified many by almost casually suggesting that the coronavirus is like a tsunami sweeping across the globe. Its toll on human life, he said, will be in the region of a severe influenza season. All we can do is to slow its movement so the NHS can cope, but let it pass. Then came along professor Neil Ferguson of Imperial College London. More cautious, more media-trained and armed with facts and figures. He initially suggested that Covid-19 may lead to more than 100,000 deaths, before adjusting his prediction downwards. Whoever is right, it seems we need to prepare for a new socially-distanced normal, potentially for some considerable time to come.

In theory, theirs is a purely scientific disagreement. It's to be expected that such differences of opinion should exist. However, while it is only right that, during our global crisis, such professionally renowned experts be brought centre stage as bearers of truth and reason, we need to remember that – like all human beings – they can be as flawed, petty and biased as the rest of us. While no doubt, in time, one or other of them will be proved correct, perhaps we would do well to recall words attributed to Albert Einstein: "Two things are infinite," he supposedly said, "the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe."

Clearly, these are two highly accomplished scientists doing their best to understand a hugely complex threat. But, maybe, alongside all their predictions, facts and assessments, where we stand on this wretched virus also comes down to our personal attitude to life and living: a complex combination of our own life experience, our faith, our politics, our reaction to risk and mortality and, even, our relationship to authority. Are you more Giesecke, relaxed about what's happening around you and, even, a bit apathetic; or Ferguson, interested in what's happening around you and involved?

When was the last time you found yourself close to a real, live sheep?

For most of us urban dwellers, I suspect it may be quite some time ago. So it's easy to understand that many of us will not even appreciate that we are actually in the middle of the lambing season.

The above passage from John's Gospel has Jesus talking of how his sheep hear and recognise his voice as they enjoy his protection and care. Reassuring stuff. Full of pleasant, comforting, pastoral imagery. But, then, how many of us appreciate the context, or the culture, in which this story is said to have taken place?

In Jesus' day, the metaphor of 'shepherding' was not merely pastoral but, also, political. The writer describes God - the Good Shepherd – as providing for his people's needs;

guiding and protecting them; leading them to places of safety and nourishment when enemies threaten. The Good Shepherd claims us as his own. Consequently, right at the heart of Christian faith lie issues of 'identity' and 'belonging'.

In our contemporary society, how much of our identity is rooted in 'belonging' and how much in 'owning', do you think?

This story offers us the image of a shepherd who meets human needs, but not every desire. As the twenty-third Psalm has it, *"Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."* Not goodness and plenty, or goodness and excess!

Those of us who take for granted the place where we belong and people we belong to are hugely blessed in a world where so many are lonely, and isolated or displaced; just as are those of us who have plenty food in our cupboards and clean water in our taps. But the shepherding with which Jesus is concerned challenges us not just to live for ourselves but rather as stewards of this planet, regarding wealth and privilege, personal treasures and opportunities with which we may be gifted as not our own. That is not easy! It involves a perspective built on generosity and compassion, sensitivity and action.

For Jesus, it also involved his death. Not as a sign of his defeat and failure, but as a symbol of future hope. He was no romantic idol, no religious crank. His chief sign of hope is given whenever bread is torn apart and the words uttered, *"Take, eat, this is my body broken for you."* He was not interested in religion as an escape from the often hellish realities of people's life. Rather his whole ministry was dedicated to the transforming of those realities into something safe, nourishing and beautiful. It is a shepherding that would lead us to find a life worth living!

Prayer:

'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me' so the ancients of our faith have believed Loving God. For experience has taught that you can meet with us in the unexpected places and at the most unexpected of times. Enrich my mind and heart with your vision and truth as I offer my prayer and express feelings and fears deep within.

This pandemic reminds us of the fragility of this world and, so, I pray for the elderly confined to their homes; for children removed from school; for those fearful of loss of income; for those who fear for their home and for all who have no home. May each be upheld by the care and concern of another. As continuing restrictions cause annoyance, may we be grateful for those who place themselves at risk: medical staff, hospital and care-home workers, research scientists. For all afflicted with coronavirus and for those with other illnesses and conditions which leave them vulnerable; for those struggling with poor mental health and for all who mourn, we pray. We place our trust in you the Good Shepherd of our faith for your love is constant and therein lies our healing and strength. Thank you for all whose lives have shown us vision and truth through neighbourly concern and kindly actions and family love. Your presence lives and your love is shown through their endeavours and I will fear no evil. Thanks be to you Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and always.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Do not bring us to the time of trial but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. Now and for ever. AMEN.

