

Sermon for Sunday 26 April 2026 – The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Carol Rivett, Reader

Acts 2.42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2.19-25; John 10.1-10

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do sit down.

The Lord is my shepherd, we hear. And what does that bring to mind? If you are anything like me, it conjures up years in Sunday School with colouring sheets of Jesus holding a cuddly little sheep. And if we were lucky, being able to stick balls of cotton wool onto the sheep for the woolly effect. However, there is more to this than crayons and cotton wool balls.

Sheep and shepherds feature over 500 times in the Bible, often serving as metaphors for God's care and guidance and the relationship between Christ and his believers. Amongst these are the shepherds in the fields at the time of Jesus's birth, the parable of the lost sheep, and Isaiah's portrayal of God as one who tends his flock like a shepherd gathering lambs into his arms.

The lectionary, the publication that determines the readings for each Sunday, is a curious thing. Last Sunday we heard about the two friends on the road to Emmaus encountering the risen Lord without realising it; until they shared a simple meal with him. Today we have rewound the clock to the time before the crucifixion, before the death of Lazarus, and we find Jesus in Jerusalem attending the Feast of Tabernacles, but in secret. He knew the authorities were already looking for him with a view to killing him.

The Feast of Tabernacles, or tents, or booths, is still celebrated in Jerusalem today. It is one of the great annual pilgrimages, and it lasts for seven days. It commemorates God's provision when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, when they had no permanent homes but lived in tents. People enjoy a variety of foods which represent the bounty of the harvest.

Halfway through the festival, Jesus went into the temple and began teaching. The Jewish people were astonished at this because they did not see Jesus as a man of learning. They tried to arrest him, but they could not do so as the time was not yet right, and many of the crowd had begun to believe in him. He then left the temple and went on to the Mount of Olives, still teaching. He was beginning to explain where he had come from and where he would go to, but it was obvious that he was not being fully understood.

During his journeying along the road, Jesus had healed a man who had been born blind, which had infuriated the Pharisees because it had occurred on the Sabbath. They had driven that formerly blind man away. The description of the Good Shepherd came about as part of Jesus's conversation with this man, whom he went to find, and with the Pharisees who were present.

He began by contrasting physical blindness with spiritual blindness. Given the controversy that there had been about the possibility of Jesus being the Messiah, and of the blind man being healed on the Sabbath, his listeners would have been listening with close attention when Jesus began to talk about a shepherd and his sheep.

The figure of a shepherd was of great significance as well as being a familiar concept in the time when Jesus lived. In biblical times, everyone would have known a shepherd. God himself was seen as the shepherd of Israel, and he had sent leaders to be his representatives on earth. However, most of these representatives had fallen short of their commission and proved to be false shepherds. A true shepherd had been promised who would care for the people of Israel. A Messiah, as was written in Ezekiel. Jesus was drawing on this Old Testament tradition of God leading his people like a shepherd. Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Micah all refer to the Messiah as being a shepherd, gathering up the scattered sheep and opening the gates of captivity for them.

The use of the analogy of people being like sheep is mostly found in the psalms and in the prophets, and often in bad contexts. David, who composed many of the psalms, was himself a shepherd and a follower of God who went on to become the King of Israel and a forerunner of the future Messiah. The 23rd Psalm one of the most well-known of them all, names the Lord as being David's own shepherd. Even people who are not regular churchgoers know this psalm, if only as the theme to the BBC programme *The Vicar of Dibley*.

In Israel, the most common material for a sheep pen to be made of was stone, made from large rocks piled on top of each other to a height of about three feet. At sundown, the sheep were led into this enclosure to protect them from predators and thieves. For security, there was only one gate into the pen. The shepherd would watch this flock of sheep overnight for their protection. In the case of smaller pens, the shepherd himself would lie down at the entrance to it, becoming the human gate that protected the sheep from all dangers. His priority is the sheep. Not only does a good shepherd protect his flock, but he will also go in search of any sheep that wanders away, searching until the lost sheep is found and brought back into the safety of the sheepfold. I'm sure you can remember a parable to that effect.

Jesus does not actually describe himself as the Good Shepherd until the verse immediately following today's Gospel reading. Here in this reading, he calls himself the gate into the sheep pen. No one can get near to the sheep except through him. All the emphasis is on the safety

and the fulfilled life of the sheep. He starts off very simply. Speaking in general terms about a shepherd who knows his sheep by name and the sheep who know his voice as distinct from any other.

In the context of Jesus's words, the Hebrew origin of the word means so much more than just 'know.' It conveys something much more personal and intimate. On the other hand, the thief is a stranger, 'who has no care at all for the sheep. The sheep do not trust him, and they run away because they do not recognise his voice.' In reality, Jesus is speaking of the difference between true shepherds and the false ones I referred to earlier, those revolutionary leaders who wanted to lead Israel to confront the might of Rome. And I'm sure it's possible to think of modern-day equivalents, both of nations and within church movements.

Jesus is using a figure of speech, but it's quite obvious that the Pharisees do not understand a word of what he's saying. So Jesus tries another way of explaining himself. Jesus defined what it meant to be a good shepherd, one who would risk his life and even die to protect the sheep from harm. 'This is me,' says Jesus. 'I am the Good Shepherd, the gatekeeper, who will die for his sheep.' This foreshadows what would face Jesus the next time he appeared in Jerusalem.

Christ, the Good Shepherd, has a very close and intimate connexion with his flock, his people. Those who belong to him will follow him. There is another image of Jesus in the Book of Revelation, which talks of a great multitude from every nation standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands. Don't forget that Jesus was also called the Lamb of God, the ultimate, unblemished, and innocent sacrifice that was offered to atone for the sins of the whole world.

We have been given a wonderful promise. Jesus will give us life in all its fullness. This is as relevant now as it was then. There are so many things in this materialistic world that distract us by promising much and delivering so little. Jesus alone can give us something more because he was prepared to give up his life for our sakes. I think we all need a shepherd. We all need someone to lead us, to protect us, and to guide us, even in this very modern, post-agricultural world of ours.

Whether it's an old-fashioned image or not, it is still true. We are still a lot like sheep. God's plan for us is to be a community of faith and to find benefit in being together in the care of our Good Shepherd. At the start of his earthly ministry, Jesus called together a community of disciples. After the crucifixion and resurrection, this group of people and like-minded friends spent a lot of time together supporting each other. One of the readings today showed us that. The reading from the letter of Peter was written to the diaspora who had been scattered but who all still followed the teachings of Jesus.

The world has not outgrown its need for a shepherd. We are very blessed to have a good, loving, faithful, and kind shepherd who promises to lead us all the days of our life through all the trials and tribulations that the world throws up at us. It is up to us to be good and faithful sheep, to continue to listen to his voice and to follow him until we are taken to live in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.