

## A Reflection from Revd Ali for the fourth Sunday of Easter

As you know, Jesus lived in a pastoral economy, so his use of sheep and shepherd metaphors would have been easily understood by the people who surrounded him. They would have understood the difference between the hired hand and the committed shepherd. The hired hand is not as invested in the sheep as the shepherd so at the first sign of danger, the hired hand deserts the sheep and leaves them to their fate. The shepherd is different. The shepherd has an emotional as well as a financial attachment to his sheep – a relationship with the sheep that will have been built up over time. The shepherd cares for the sheep.

So when we think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, it is comforting to know that there is a Shepherd who looks after us, who knows each of us by name, who is emotionally invested in us, who won't desert us at the first sign of danger. Who knows us completely even if we don't recognize him. A little bit like that first Easter Morning when Mary, distraught outside the empty tomb, didn't realize that the man that she thought was the gardener was, in fact Jesus, until he called her by name. It is comforting to know that we can never become so lost that we can't be found. That, whatever decisions we make, whatever paths we take, that create distance between us and God, when we realize that we are lost, and cry out, then the Good Shepherd can and will come to find us.

It is comforting to think that the Good Shepherd offers to lay down his life to protect his sheep. We never need to be frightened because the Good Shepherd is always there, always looking out for us, always protecting us. That is such a comforting thought, that sometimes we might be tempted to think of this Gospel passage in the same way as a gentle comfortable story, a lullaby even, an idyllic pastoral scene into which we are invited.

But today's Gospel passage (John 10: 11 – 18) is so much more than that. It is a deeply challenging passage. It comes as one of the 'I am' statements of Jesus. The 'I am's' that Jesus uses to challenge us to open our hearts and our minds to who exactly Jesus is. Jesus uses the 'I am' statements to give us an insight into the greatness of God through Jesus Christ. To offer us a window of understanding into the kingdom of God.

This passage comes immediately after Jesus has healed a blind man on the Sabbath. An incident which brings Jesus into direct conflict with the temple authorities. Jesus restores the sight of a man born blind. But it is the temple authorities, the learned ones, the ones who should have been so close to God that they understood who Jesus really was, who needed to have their spiritual sight restored. They are blind to the Son of God and they continue to renounce Jesus and his message of the Kingdom of God.

We are in the privileged position of listening to this passage with the benefit of the knowledge of the resurrection. The great and comforting good news of that first Easter Sunday. But to his disciples he is already predicting his own death. Jesus said 'I lay down my life - no one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord'.

Jesus was telling them and is telling us, that *he is* the Good Shepherd and *he will* lay down his life for us, his sheep. No-one is going to take his life, he is going to lay down his life.... It is his death and resurrection that brings us to new life, a new relationship with the heavenly Father. It is his willingness to give his life that in turn gives us life. On that night before he died, when Jesus was arrested he didn't fight back. He stopped those who would have protected him fighting back. He even healed the ear of a soldier hurt by one of the disciples' sword. Jesus allowed himself to be taken. Jesus allowed himself to be wrongly convicted. Jesus carried his cross to the place of

execution and then laid down on the cross and allowed his enemies to crucify him. In all that time, he didn't once cry out against the injustice. Not once did he denounce those who had betrayed him. Not once did he curse those involved in his torture and execution. Jesus lay down his life, no-one took it from him, he gave it freely and asked for forgiveness for those involved in his death.

The temple authorities, the Pharisees, Sadducees, all the members of the Sanhedrin, they thought that they had taken Jesus' life and power. They were wrong. Jesus laid down his life and earthly power, no-one took it from him. The soldiers who had the task of nailing Jesus to the cross might have felt responsible for Jesus' eventual death. But they weren't. Jesus laid down his life, they were just facilitating the inevitable – they didn't take his life, he lay down his life. His friend, Judas, despaired at his part in bringing about Jesus' death. But he wasn't responsible for Jesus' death. Judas didn't take Jesus' life, Jesus lay it down.

Jesus gave his own life. He may not have wanted to. We know that he prayed so hard in the garden of Gethsemane that he sweated blood. But he accepted, that as our Good Shepherd, it was his job to lay down his life. To sacrifice himself for his sheep. They didn't take his life, he laid down his life for you and for me.

So what does that mean for us, here in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

Sometimes, it is hard to accept the gifts that other's give us. It is incredibly hard to accept that we are worthy of such love, that someone is prepared to die for us. It is so very hard to accept that the Son of God did exactly that. That he laid down his life, for you and me, so we could have life, and life in all its fullness.

And that is, I think, our challenge today. To accept that we are the beneficiaries of Jesus' kenosis, his self-sacrifice. Because with that acceptance comes a responsibility to respond to that sacrifice.

We are all called to live our lives as Easter people. To live in the knowledge that Jesus laid down his life for us. To rejoice in the power of God that brought Jesus back to life on the third day, and to be changed by that knowledge. The Good Shepherd knows you by name. The Good Shepherd loves you and wants you to be the person that only you can be. To be the person that can do the things that only you can do, and to do them willingly. To empower you to 'lay down your life', in whatever form that takes, and to wholeheartedly follow where he leads.

Let us pray

Lord Jesus Christ. Shepherd of the sheep. Lamb of God, we thank you that though we repeatedly err and stray. Ignoring your voice and wandering far from your side. You not only seek us out, but also willingly lay down your life for us, freely giving that we might freely receive.

Equip us now to show our gratitude by following you more closely. Trusting you more completely and obeying you more faithfully. So that our lives as well as our words may give honour to you, now and always,

Amen.