

SERMON – 25 APRIL 2021 - Acts 4.5-12, John 10.11-18

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus describes himself as “the good shepherd.” Too often our picture of the good shepherd is a stained glass window image, the rather wimpy looking Jesus holding a lamb that looks as cute and cuddly as Selwyn the cat.

In Northumberland Brian, one of my churchwardens, was a farmer, and he had a lot of sheep. I learned how much hard work it was – checking the stock at least twice a day, more often when there were lambs in the fields.

He was a good shepherd, and his sheep came first. I’m not sure he’d have laid down his life for them, but there were certainly times when life was put on hold because of them. There were Sundays when he’d arrive late, leave early, or sometimes not turn up at all because it was lambing time.

Jesus, and the crowd listening to him, knew the reality of being a shepherd. When Jesus says he is the good shepherd, they knew what a good shepherd should be – and they knew the cost. They also knew the difference between the shepherd and the hired hand – you can imagine them nodding sagely when Jesus spells out the difference. Perhaps, as he addressed the crowds, they understood his words about laying down his life for his sheep – they might have wondered if he was going to lead a campaign against the Romans, lead an uprising, and perhaps die in the process.

They would have not expected the man who spoke to the crowds, the man who taught, who healed, who they thought might be the Messiah – they did not expect him to die on a cross. One thing to lose your life in revolution, but to give up without a fight and let them nail you to a cross – not much of a shepherd, was he. And now he’s dead – someone else will get the sheep.

But there are disciples, there are followers, men and women, who dare to believe he is alive. In these weeks and months after Easter, they are trying to get their heads round the reality of his life – the reality of his death and his life. You can imagine someone saying “Do you remember when he described himself as a good shepherd? Do you remember he said he’d lay down his life for his sheep? Didn’t he say he had power to take it up again?” Remember he said “I have received this command from my Father” – what does all this mean? What does it mean when you still feel under attack, what does it mean when your proclamation that Jesus is alive is causing waves? We are part of a worldwide Church, and many of our fellow Christians face all sorts of opposition and repression because of their faith – I suggest their faith in the good shepherd is

probably deeper than ours', and their understanding of what it really means is different to ours' as well.

Last week our bible reading from Acts was Peter's healing of the man begging by the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, and the reaction of the people and the temple authorities. This week the story continues – and the disciples find that their actions, their words, their witness, their belief that Jesus is alive – this is leading them to be arrested. We know they had faced opposition when Jesus was alive, but then he was there to protect them. Only a few weeks ago they had seen him arrested, dragged off, and crucified – now they find themselves arrested. At the beginning of Acts 4 we are told they are arrested and put into custody till the following day – I wonder if it was a long night, and in the darkest hours someone had said “do you think we're going to be crucified too?” Was the reality of what they had signed up for beginning to dawn on them?

Imagine having to stand up before the Chief Priest, rulers, elders, scribes – being in court is scary – Peter found strength from somewhere, the Spirit worked through him (but I still don't suppose it was easy) and he found the words. “We did this by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.” Remember that these religious leaders believed that they had been doing God's will, they had crucified Jesus because they believed him to be wrong, to be dangerous, because they believed that if they got rid of him this mad movement, this wrong movement, would quietly die. They must have been annoyed it hadn't quietly died, and must have been angry with Peter for daring to suggest they were wrong. Even worse he quotes Scripture at them, he uses a verse from Psalm 118, and tells them that “This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’ There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” That is not the message the rulers wanted to hear – it is a dangerous thing to say.

I believe that Christ's death has changed everything. I do believe that God created a world he loved, and that it is human failing and human sin that have separated us from God's love. I believe that Christ's death and resurrection has paid the price for that sin, and that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. I want a church that acts with the love of God, that welcomes in the love of God, that seeks to serve God's people and show them His love. I want a church where love is stronger than judgement, and where people put the effort in because we believe that even in life in nice comfortable Allestree needs a relationship with God to make it complete. I want a church that preaches forgiveness, that knows we are all sinners, and accepts that no one is perfect. I want a church where we laugh together, cry together, support one another, and seek to serve the living God.

I hate to think of the number of times I have used a cornerstone somewhere in the building as a sermon illustration – and we all know how important our buildings are. We also know how our faith and our worship has survived this last year. I took communion to Margaret Western on Thursday, communion in the garden. There is a lady who has been part of the church for years, who has a huge amount of knowledge about churches, buildings and history, who likes her tradition – and yet her faith has survived a year without all of this, and we celebrated our Easter Communion with joy.

Many of you know I took a wedding at Abbeydale Nursing Home on Wednesday – Jeff and Pauline. He went in to Abbeydale in the autumn, leaving his beloved Pauline at home – they’ve been together 18 years. On the phone to her one night he said he her “I wish we’d got married.” She said “why don’t you ask me then?”, and – with the help of the Archbishop’s Faculty Office, we worked it out. Jeff is now in end-of-life care, so we had a small wedding in the conservatory at Abbeydale, with five family members, three staff, and a Zoom link for all the residents and the rest of the family in Canada. It reminded me that the church is far bigger than a building, that we can celebrate God’s love in wonderful ways.

Our friends at Abbeydale have needed incredible strength over the last few months – it has not been easy in a residential home through Covid. Jeff and Pauline will need incredible strength, she’ll have to cope with the death of her husband within the next few weeks or (we pray) months.

Christ is our cornerstone, and we proclaim the Risen Christ. When your cornerstone – the stone at the top of the arch – is firmly in place, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Amen.