

SUNDAY 25TH APRIL EASTER 4

Thought for the Week: "Following the 'Good Shepherd'." (John 10: 11-18):

The image of the 'Good Shepherd' is one of the most lasting and most loved of all the images of Jesus.

In the Bible, the image of the 'Good Shepherd' is one that appears from the Book Genesis (Jacob, on his deathbed, describes God as the "Shepherd of his life all his days" – Gen 48:24) to the Book of Revelation (John, imagining what heaven and the New Creation will look like in the world to come says, in Rev 7:17, "the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their "Shepherd," and guide them to springs of 'living water,' and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.")



In much of the Old Testament the image of the 'Good Shepherd' is particularly associated with King David, who is called to be King of Israel while being a "Shepherd Boy" in Bethlehem (1 Samuel 17) and with his many poems, perhaps most famously in Psalm 23 "The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want."

So, the image of the 'Good Shepherd' has a long and important history, and it permeates so much of our understanding both of Christian faith and even of God. So, what is it about 'shepherding,' and a 'good' Shepherd in particular, that still appeals, even today?

Often, one of our first thoughts is we think of God's care and protection; the Shepherd will, we believe, "look after us." In terms of Jesus, we think of what He has done for us and for all the world on the Cross on Good Friday, His willingness to pay the ultimate price and "lay down His life for the sheep." And there is certainly this aspect in the reading we have for this Sunday when Jesus says He will stand His ground and compares Himself to the 'hired hand' who runs away from the sheep when the wolf comes.



So, something about the protection of God, the safety in God, the security under the watch and the gaze of Jesus.

But there is also, within the 'shepherding' image, the key importance of relationship, not just the relationship of the Shepherd to the Sheep but also the sheep to the Shepherd, particularly in the Middle Eastern tradition where, even today, the Shepherd leads the sheep, and they follow the Shepherd because they know His voice and He calls them by name.



Many of you will know I have spoken on this on many occasions. Why not? It is, after all, an iconic image. But as we reflect on 'shepherding' and on being 'good' sheep, as well as following a 'good' Shepherd, in the light of Easter, what does that look like? As 'good' sheep, we need to pay attention,

we need to seek to hear the Shepherd's voice, we need to be aware if He is on the move and be willing to walk in His footsteps and follow Him wherever He goes.

We may seek the "green pasture" and the "still waters" of Psalm 23, and the 'cool' of the day, but in the light and the transforming possibility of what Easter means, we need to know Jesus is only likely to 'rest' for a short while before He is up, and on the move again, seeking to about the 'work' of His Kingdom. And, even Psalm 23 alludes to this, where it talks in the closing verses about the long journey of pilgrimage heading eastwards, climbing up from Jericho



hundreds if not thousands of feet until you eventually ascend to the ridge and there before you opens out the image of the whole of Jerusalem itself, both physically and as a metaphor, to let you know that you have reached journey's end, or perhaps but a new beginning.

So, life with Jesus, especially after Easter, is a "life on the road." For a few this will mean literally, those who perhaps become missionaries or evangelists or travelling preachers. But for the vast majority of us, those who have put physical 'roots' down in one particular community, it becomes even more crucial that we take the image of the 'travelling' Shepherd to heart in our spirits, in our daily life, and in our discipline of discipleship. Otherwise, we can become comfortable, sluggish, even grumpy sheep, who seek faith only for ourselves, or on 'our' terms, seeking purely "what we like" from God or from Church, and who complain at many things preferring to be 'left alone' to graze the little bit of pasture we have grown to know so well. We can lose sight of the greater Vision and pilgrimage journey, and the danger is we can lose sight of the Shepherd Himself, without knowing it, as He makes His way over the hill.

So, we need to stay in touch with this 'good Shepherd,' this Shepherd "always on the move." How do we know when we are doing this, and how do we know when we are not?

The answer, at least the majority of it, I think lies within the reading for this Sunday itself. Verse 17 and 18 of Chapter 10 state, "For this reason," says Jesus, "the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."

Now this can sound almost a riddle, or something simply to do with Jesus and all that happened to Him literally through Easter. But it also eminently true for all of us, because it is an honest evaluation of any act of love, however large or small in and of itself.

If we want to hear the 'Good Shepherd's' voice above and beyond our own, we need to quieten our own likes and dislikes enough so that we can try to hear what He wants and where He wants us to go. This is the 'laying down' as Jesus calls it, the determination of saying, as we have looked at before, "WWJD" ("What Would Jesus Do") or "what would Jesus want?" before simply seeking to please or do what is 'comfortable' or prudent, or expedient, for us. All acts of love involve such self-sacrifice. It is the 'harder,' 'riskier,' more costly way. But it is more than likely, His way, whether in we engage with Him through prayer, through the reading of Scripture, through worship, or through the service of humanity or Creation.

The 'good Shepherd's' way is the 'self-sacrificial' way. That's why we don't particularly like it, but deep within us we know that it has always been the 'right' way, for it is the way of love.

And sometimes we win' and achieve this, and sometimes we don't, and fall short. But nearly always we know.

The promise of Easter, and indeed the "Good News" though is, as our reading also states, it is in the giving of love that we will find ourselves, not as we were before but as we are capable of 'becoming.'

This is what Jesus means when He says, “I lay down my life so that I may take it up again” – the same life, but now a transformed and changed, resurrected life by the experience of deep sacrificial love.

No wonder then that Jesus says, “For this reason the Father loves Him,” but not just Him but all the ‘sheep’ who are willing to follow Him on this path.

John 10, in the light of Easter, becomes the blueprint for the Church, the people God wants us to be for ourselves, and for the world. As Jesus Himself says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one Shepherd.” (John 10:16)

In other words, Jesus will be about His ‘work,’ be on His self-sacrificial ‘journey’ with us, or without us. But, maybe, it will be through our acts of self-sacrificial love, every prayer, every story believed, every givenness to God in surrender in worship, and every painful footstep of service that the world may begin to know again that it has always been truly loved. As the season of Easter continues, may its end be but a new beginning, in you and in me.

Matt Thomson



‘Physical’ Church worship is now back

Following a meeting of the Joint Leadership Team last week, both Church Councils have decided that they wish to begin “physical” worship again, alongside and integrated with “online” worship, in what we call “Hybrid Church,” as of today (Sunday 25th April).

The service on the 25th will be at Congresbury, and then it will alternate, week by week, with Banwell on the 2nd May etc., as it did before. Those from each community, and those who have joined during this time “online” are very welcome to attend either ‘physical’ Church for worship subject to all the previous COVID rules:

- Everyone must wear a Facemask, sanitise their hands, and be willing to undertake NHS test and trace.
- Younger children are very welcome but, as you can appreciate, we are not able to open the Children’s Corners just yet. So, we will from next week provide an individual activity bag for them to share with their parents in the pews.
- People will need to be willing to sit in their ‘bubbles,’ up to a maximum of six in a bubble, and to keep a two-metre distance from other bubbles.
- Sadly, at present there still cannot be any singing by the congregation when we are in the Church building, but the singing group and musicians will be providing live worship.
- Communion can be taken in the form of “bread only.”
- Obviously, if you are aware of any reason you should self-isolate, or show any symptoms of COVID (new continuous cough, fever, loss of taste or smell), you should refrain from physically attending and if necessary seek medical advice.
- Finally, we understand that we all would love to stay and chat, but this is not yet possible so we gently ask if, after the service, people would be kind enough to leave fairly promptly to keep social interaction to a minimum.

The Wardens and others are very aware that ‘returning’ to ‘physical’ Church will be a great blessing for some, and of considerable concern for others. It is simply there as part of our offering as a Church community – we will continue with “online Church” as an integrated aspect to our physical worship, and we will continue with Church@Home link groups, Pew News and the offer of Home Communion which is open and available to all.

To find out more about any of these or to discuss any concerns please give me a ring or speak to one of the Wardens in either Church.

Home Communion:

Just to say, although we visited many people over the Easter period with a very simple Home Communion (often on the doorstep, and in the form of bread only) we are conscious that there may well be others out there for whom this may be either something that be a good 'bridge' and 'way in' to physical Church either for the first time or for the first time in a long time.



If you would like to discuss this further or would like to arrange for a Home Communion, then please give either myself or Andrea Lowe a ring (Andrea is kindly currently arranging visits).

Matt Thomson 07970 140 064. Andrea can be contacted at the New Creation Church Office 01934 833126 – and this number has an answer machine so we will get back to you.

I, or a colleague, would then physically visit you, respecting all appropriate COVID guidelines, and be flexible enough to be guided by what most helps you and enables you to feel it is a special time and one in which you feel safe.

Matt Thomson



Discipleship, Journeying with God and Growing in Faith:

It is wonderful that we can now meet again physically for worship. Unfortunately, we cannot yet hold 'physical' home groups or study groups, but that doesn't mean that we still can't journey with God and grow in our faith, either through an online group or through individual devotion.

Living Faith-The Chosen, looking at the worldwide phenomenon series examining the life and ministry of Jesus and His followers continues Monday evenings at 7.30pm. If you would like to join us, PLEASE contact Kirsty Bowles (Lay Pioneer Minister) email:

kirsty.bowles@newcreationchurches.org.uk or **07871 513151** to get the code for the Zoom meeting.

Or you can watch the series (now on Series 2!) available via The Chosen App or on YouTube in your own time.

Rule of Life Group starts again 5th May via Zoom at 7.30pm

We are excited to be looking at Bill and Kristi's latest book (and accompanying course) called Journey of the Soul (JOTS for short), available on Amazon and other booksellers. We see a healthy Rule of life as one of continuing spiritual, emotional, and relational growth.

With Scripture, self-assessments, and soul care practices to support our progress along the way, we will engage this insightful and inspiring course (lasting six weeks) to help us all in following the Lord Jesus on an adventure of spiritual growth and transformation. In the weeks to come as we read, pray, and participate in the group, we know that all who join us on this journey will make wonderful discoveries about authentic discipleship to Jesus that fosters lasting emotional and spiritual growth.

This is a stand-alone course lasting six weeks via Zoom every Wednesday evening at 7.30 starting Wednesday 5th May. Even if you have not joined any of the previous Rule of Life sessions, we very much hope you will consider coming with us on this pilgrimage of faith. Please email

ianstocker17@gmail.com or nick@jarrett-kerr.com for further details.