Easter 4 - Acts 4: 5-12; 1 John 3: 16-end; John 10: 11-18

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Listening to the first sentence of this morning’s gospel reading, it will come as no surprise to you that today has been called Good Shepherd Sunday.

We heard the reading from Acts which talked about the beginning of the ministry of the apostles, who went out and healed by faith in the name of Jesus. They were arrested and spoke boldly about how they were doing these things not in their own names or in their own power, but in God’s name. And they took the opportunity to have a quick dig at those who caused Jesus to be crucified.

We sang the 23rd Psalm, the Lord is my shepherd. Then we heard the reading from the first letter of John, which explained that God’s love is demonstrated in the loving acts of those who love Him. Let us love not in words or speech but in truth and action. Ours is not a theoretical faith but an active one.

And then of course we came to the gospel reading of the Good Shepherd from John’s gospel. For what it is worth, ancient tradition held that the writer of the John letters was the same John the Apostle who was understood to be the author of John’s gospel too, but this is sometimes disputed in modern circles.

And all of those readings speak in various ways about faith. Not just faith in Jesus – the faith shown by the apostles, and indeed by all believers - but also the faith of Jesus: I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – is what he says.

It is extraordinary that - with all the metaphors at his disposal, Jesus should choose to describe himself as the ‘good shepherd’. At the time of Jesus, shepherding was listed by the rabbis as being one of those professions that no law-abiding Jew should teach to their children. And even in medieval times, shepherds were seen as being not quite the thing. Something I read around Christmas time called the shepherds who came to the stable to see the Christ-child ‘thugs’ – which may or may not have been true….. But either way, the constant and devoted care required of the shepherds for their sheep, day in - day out, meant that they couldn’t attend church or take part in religious festivals. Apparently in years gone by, shepherds used to be buried with a strand of wool in their hands so that, when they got to the pearly gates, the reason for them not going to church would be clear for St Peter to see. 😊 But it was in this total and utter devotion of the shepherd to the flock - devotion uninterrupted even by the demands of religious practice - that Jesus chose to describe his devotion to us.

If we see ourselves as sheep to Jesus’ shepherd, then we are to mirror the faith of Jesus in relation to His Father. And this, I think, is demonstrated in three ways:

First, the faith of Jesus is the faith in one who is present – his Father, who knows him and is known by him, and who is always close at hand. The God of the Old Testament was perceived as a more distant God, but the Incarnation – the coming of God in human form – changed that view for all time. God is close at hand. So one of the ways in which we are to show faith in the Shepherd is by living out our belief in that presence.

Second, Jesus also lives out the faith that God is able: not just present, but able. And when I say that, I mean that God is active in our lives and can change things. There is the story of a priest visiting a parishioner in hospital, and the priest, sitting at the man’s bedside, alongside the man’s wife, offered to pray for him. The wife’s response was immediate – oh goodness, is it that bad? No, of course it wasn’t ‘that bad’! Prayer is not a last resort; it should be a first resort, because it is an active demonstration in our belief that God can and does act in the lives of those whom he created and loves.

And third is faith in the one who is good: not only present and able but also good. The sheep understands all those things of the shepherd. Not just that the shepherd is there present with the flock; not just that the shepherd is able to act to care for and look after the flock; but also that the shepherd has the best interests of the flock in his heart and his mind.

Those three things are what it means to have faith in Jesus and the faith of Jesus.

When I was an ordinand at Westcott House, the bell in Old Court called us to worship. And inscribed on that bell are the words: the one who calls is faithful. Those words come from Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians – that was Paul’s faith – that the God who calls us to act in His name is also with us in what He calls us to do. We can see that this is Jesus’ faith. And it is given to be our faith too.

And there has been that sense in my own ministry, that, when things have been at their most awful, tedious, difficult, stress-inducing, whatever, there is always somewhere that voice that reminds me: the one who calls is faithful. The shepherd who calls us will come when we are most lost, and will find us, and remind us that he never left us in the first place.

When I was thinking about our new Taize service, which will happen for the first time on the evening of May 6th, a friend told the story of having listened to a French bishop who in turn was talking about being engaged in supporting young people in their faith development, and described taking 1000 youngsters a year to Taize, and to Lourdes, and also giving them an experience within their own context of some sort of social engagement, community service type thing. This story too seemed to be about a shepherd leading his flock to new pastures, enabling these young people to experience their own faith in a different context but also to experience the faith of others likewise in different contexts.

All the unmarried ordinands at Westcott were required to do a long placement, about a term, and they all talked about how that long placement – in deprived areas of Salford, or parts of India where the college has links, or at Yale Divinity School in the United States – was an experience which was deeply significant to their training and formation as priests. It was a substantial period of time as well as substantial in quality, and it caused them to see faith differently.

At Deanery Synod the other night, one of the diocesan reps talked about +Stephen’s keynote Synod speech, and how his visit to Kenya recently, with other senior members of the diocese, changed how he sees his role as a faith leader. Archdeacon Elizabeth also touched on it when she came to give us a talk as part of our Lent course. And I am hopeful that the link we are about to embark on with a church in South Trinidad might help us to see our faith and the faith of others differently too.

We are all shepherded to these places; these places that give us time and space for deep thought – the sort of thought that becomes action. Because we are led by the one who is our Good Shepherd.

Lord, lead us all in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

**Amen**