Acts 2: 42-end; 1 Peter 2: 19-end; John 10: 1-10

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

John's Gospel has been described as ‘a book in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim’. New Christians can get something from it, but old ones can too.

There is a certain Old Testament scholar who teaches at a certain theological college, who warns his students not to ‘confuse familiarity with understanding’. And this gospel passage from John seems to me to be one of those passages where we might be in danger of doing exactly that. Jesus the Good Shepherd. It brings to mind all those awful pictures of the white Caucasian Jesus so beloved of the Victorians, carrying this sweet, docile, very clean lamb across his shoulders. It is a picture that most Sunday School children of a certain era will be familiar with.

It turns out that this Good Shepherd story though is not designed to appeal to children. It is intended to inspire the faith of adults in difficult times. It is an image meant to counter forces that would isolate them from each other and undermine their faith in Christ. How appropriate is that!

Just suppose we could time travel, back 2000 years, from that Sunday School to one of the house churches for which John wrote his gospel. We have been evicted from the synagogue. Maybe we have stayed in Palestine despite the opposition to our faith shown by the Jewish authorities. Or maybe we have left Palestine to get away from all that. Either way, we are getting together in a small group, praying for the strength to withstand the widespread opposition to our faith. And then we hear this passage, in which Jesus states: I am the Good Shepherd.

There is a whole string of I am sayings in John: I am the bread, the light, a path, a gate, the vine. And all these things are things we need; necessities in fulfilling basic physical and spiritual needs. The whole point of these I am sayings was to say something about the identity of Jesus, and also about the nature of discipleship.

But back to the shepherd: who was a common sight across the ancient Mediterranean world.

We assume – rightly – that we are the sheep, the flock, and that God is the shepherd. The thieves or bandits are those who come to steal or destroy our unity and identity as a community. They would have been the Pharisees in those days, but for us could be any distraction from our faith, anything that draws us away from God. The bandits are not motivated by love of the sheep but by personal gain. Whereas Jesus, the good shepherd, is motivated purely by love.

When I started reading, I was struck by an idea I hadn’t considered before: the relationship between shepherding and kingship. Like me, you may have thought of the good shepherd story as saying something about humility, as well as leadership and love. But if we take a step back and look at this story in context, we notice that chapter nine has been all about the question: Is Jesus from God, or not? Is he a prophet or not? Is he the Messiah or not? Is he the so-called Son of Man, sent to be judge over the world?

And then suddenly it looks like an about-turn to this shepherd image.

But it isn’t. We see the shepherd quite often in the Bible linked with kingship. We might not see rulers in that light at all; rulers and leaders today are distant bureaucrats on the whole, chairing meetings and whatever else they do at several levels removed from real life. But if we look back into, say, the book of the prophet Ezekiel, the ideal king is pictured as a shepherd. And that seems quite likely to have been modelled on David, the boy king who was rocketed into it pretty well straight off the hillside, after all his older brothers had been rejected for the role.

So: is Jesus, here, perhaps making reference to his own claim to be the true king of Israel, as well as calling the people to him as one who knows each of us individually?

The point is that you can tell a true king the same as you can tell a true shepherd. Anyone can rock up claiming to be the Special One – witness David Icke: he of the turquoise shell suit – who claimed in the early 90s to be a Son of the Godhead (and who has had his Facebook page removed in the last few days for repeated violations of Facebook policy regarding what they called harmful misinformation. But that claim doesn’t make them the Special One. The true one is the one who is heard and heeded; who identifies with the flock as well as leads them in green pastures, and who makes sure they are fed and given water.

In these times we are living through now, the Christian community is having to operate very differently from before: we are learning about – and simultaneously using – new technology, in order to stay connected to each other.

(And both welcome and sorry to any among you who have only just discovered that we who are more regular Facebookers have been here all along – I made assumptions which were wrong, and I’m truly sorry if you felt in any way abandoned. I am glad that, thanks to the efforts of a much wider team, communications continue to improve).

But yes, people across the country, and presumably across the world wherever coronavirus is thwarting attempts to be church and worship as a community, are being resourceful in finding new ways to be faithful. We might have feared that people would be drawn away from faith by not going to church Sunday by Sunday, but the evidence seems to be that people are not only maintaining their faith, but developing it and growing in it too.

There is story after story of church people watching TV services and following worship online and so on, but there are others who are engaging who haven’t previously. Certainly not with the faithfulness and regularity of now. There is a growing feeling that people are continuing to discover who Jesus is; and who Jesus is calling them to be in these strange times.

Talking about this shepherd image again - and about children wading in it but elephants swimming in it: notice the two parts – the two different shepherd analogies. One has the sheep in a walled sheepfold, with a gate, and uses the gate, and calls his own sheep – because it is a shared space – by name. But we are told that the disciples didn’t understand what Jesus was trying to explain, so he tried again: this time he takes them out into the wilderness. This time there is only a fairly rudimentary pen, with no proper gate, so the shepherd acts as a gate, lying across the gap where the gate isn’t, in order to stop the sheep from wandering off and to stop the bandits or wolves from getting in.

And then finally we get to the punchline of this whole story. I came so that they might have life – and not just any old existence, but abundant life. Not just warm and breathing, but thriving. This single phrase looks back to the ideal existence of the Creation, before it all went wrong, but also forward to the resurrection life we hope for. But not just those; also to life in the here and now when we have an interactive relationship with God, not in the safety of the domestic sheepfold, nor yet in the wilderness, but somewhere in these new pastures, where we can be connected to God and each other in acts of worship and acts of service both given and received.

**Amen**