

Jesus says I am the Good Shepherd – and as today is often called Good Shepherd Sunday, I'm going to talk about shepherds, and about sheep! The Bible tells us a lot about them – the first mention of sheep is early in Genesis, and they were important for food and wool as well as for sacrificial offerings. Sheep were kept in immense numbers. The Ancient Israelites were a pastoral people and there were many shepherds among them: you will recognise the names of Abraham and Jacob, Moses, King David, the prophet Amos – and more from the Old Testament. Consequently, people hearing Jesus speaking of being a good shepherd would immediately have recognised the role and the relationship – and the risks. Sheep had to be protected from predators by night as well as led to fresh pastures by day, and a great deal was expected of shepherds – they would put their own well-being at risk for their sheep.

I can't think of sheep without thinking of *One Man and his Dog* – a television programme back in the 1970s and 80s with shepherds and their dogs driving sheep into pens as they would do in sheep trials. Interestingly, rather than being driven, the Psalmist in Psalm 23 speaks of being led:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

...if you'll forgive the King James Version.

And this, in fact, is correct. In the middle east, because of the terrain shepherds tended to go before their flocks and call to them to follow – often by the names they give to individual sheep. So when Jesus says of the shepherd: 'He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice...', Jesus is actually repeating good practice – straight out of the practical shepherding handbook, as it were. And Jesus is quite specific – he doesn't say that the sheep understand what the shepherd is saying, but that they recognise and trust his voice.

I was reading this week about the difficulties posed by so many people in the health and caring professions having to wear protective facemasks. Half our face is hidden if we put on a mask, and we lose so many of the non-verbal cues – the smiles, the frowns, the involuntary gestures we make with our mouths that corroborate (or not!) the words we hear to make up the whole message. 'When you're smiling, when you're smiling, the world smiles with you', sings Louis Armstrong, who had one of the most brilliant of smiles. Unless, of course, you're wearing a facemask – then the world can't see your smile, let alone smile back. And if we can't see the smile, then hearing the sound of a voice you recognise and trust becomes so much more important – especially to those who are unwell. Jesus calls his own by name, and as Christians we follow him because we know and trust his voice. Let us make sure as we continue to socially distance ourselves, that none of our family or friends are missing hearing a friendly voice – especially if it is ours.

Having mentioned one of the difficulties caused by wearing facemasks; of course, a much greater difficulty would be caused by our health and care professionals, and other key workers and volunteers not wearing personal protective equipment – and on Tuesday this week people across the UK stood in silence for a minute in memory of all those who had died of coronavirus while working in the service of others. It would be inappropriate for me naïvely to link all these deaths with the example of Jesus, the gatekeeper, who made a once for all sacrifice in laying down his life for his flock. But as Jesus's flock, who recognises the depth of love expressed both in his voice and in his example, we should be all the more

grateful that people are prepared to serve the human family in this way – often putting the health and well-being of others before themselves. Each of us has a debt of gratitude, and if we are to respond to the call of Jesus's voice, each of us needs to think how we might repay this debt in terms of service to others.