

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES



The Church's prayer for Sunday 25th April

Risen Christ,
faithful shepherd of your Father's sheep:
teach us to hear your voice
and to follow your command,
that all your people may be gathered into one flock,
to the glory of God the Father.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 25th April

A reading from the book of Acts 4:5-12

⁵The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. ⁶Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. ⁷They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹Jesus is

"the stone you builders rejected,
which has become the cornerstone."^[a]

¹²Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

A Gospel reading from the Gospel of John, Chapter 10 verses 11-18

¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I

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lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

A reflection from Revd Priscilla Slusar, member of the Lordsbridge Team Chapter

Being part of a community is important for all of us, and especially if you live in a rural area. To feel that you are a member of a wider group, with shared interests and ideas, that you belong; you're meeting up with people you know and can talk to, you have a role in that community, a part to play, you're part of the team. Perhaps we have felt this even more strongly over this last year. The isolation of lockdown has made us more aware of what we are missing – not being able to meet up with friends and family, not being able to continue with hobbies or social groups.

However, we have also become more aware of the impact on other members of the community; those who are lonely, bereaved or shielding because of ill health. Our sense of community has been heightened because of these unusual circumstances.

In the gospel today Jesus is also talking about a community – the community of his followers, the sheep. We are the sheep (not always a flattering metaphor because sheep are often rather silly!) and Jesus is the shepherd. This is an image which occurs frequently in the Bible; Jesus is building on the representation of God as a shepherd in the Old Testament. We are all familiar with the well-loved Psalm 23 “The Lord is my shepherd”. Jesus is using the same idea of sheep and a good shepherd to illustrate his commitment to and love for his followers. The sheep need guidance and care and he will provide it.

I was watching Countryfile on television last week and saw a young teenage girl on a farm, looking after a flock of sheep. She had lived on the farm for 10 years and, from an early age, had learnt how to help with lambing and how to care for the sheep. There was a lovely scene showing her collecting together the orphan lambs and bottle feeding them. As soon as she appeared they knew that she was going to look after them and they just followed her into the farmhouse to receive their bottle of milk. It was an image of love and trust – from shepherd to sheep and from sheep to shepherd. This is the same image that Jesus is using.

Jesus has such loyalty to his flock that he will even face danger for them. When sheep face attack from wolves their natural instinct is to run away, to scatter, but this makes it easier for the wolf to pick off individuals. Jesus describes the way in which he, as the

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good shepherd, will fight for the sheep, trying to keep the flock together and safe. Even if one of the sheep breaks away, the shepherd will call that sheep by name and bring it back into the fold. This is not a cosy image; the shepherd is working hard on behalf of the sheep. It's an indication of the strength of that love and the commitment that is needed when faced with such challenges.

The hired hand doesn't have the same commitment to the sheep. He will run away when there is danger because he hasn't got the same depth of love for the sheep – the relationship is wrong, the feeling of teamwork in the community is missing because the leader hasn't got that commitment.

The image of the shepherd is an image based on a strong and deep relationship with the sheep. This depth of love means that he will even die in order to save them. Jesus is, of course, predicting his own death – he is emphasising that he will die for our salvation.

In today's gospel reading Jesus goes on to talk about the growth of the community. He talks about enlarging the flock. The original sheep that Jesus addressed were the people of Israel, but he then talks about the other sheep who will be brought into the fold – these could be the Gentiles or the outcasts of society. God's love and salvation brought about by Jesus' death is for all people not just for the chosen few.

This message is just as significant today as it was in Jesus' time. It's an open invitation for everyone to be part of that community – to belong to God, to have a special identity as God's people, to be loved and saved by him.

As followers of Jesus we are represented in this gospel reading as sheep. But we are also challenged throughout the Bible to follow the example of Jesus – to model ourselves on him. Therefore, we also have a responsibility to act as a shepherd to others; to show love, care and commitment and to draw people into the fold. One of the other readings set for today is from the first epistle of John. In this epistle John says "Let us love not in word or speech but in truth and action". It is a call to be proactive in our love for others and to draw people to God through our deeds as well as our words.

There was a clear example of this on television last week. A Panorama programme highlighted the disturbing issue of racism in the Church of England. Many reports have been written about this in the past but the programme now called for clear action to address the problem, to ensure that the Church is truly inclusive. The Archbishop of York, who was interviewed on the programme, stated that this is exactly what the Church intends to do.

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We each have a role to play in developing a community based on love and belonging. The good shepherd embodies God's love for all, and we are called to live together as one flock and strive to be good shepherds ourselves.

Amen