**Sunday 21 April – Fourth Sunday of Easter**

**The Collect**

Almighty God,

whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life:

raise us, who trust in him,

from the death of sin to the life of righteousness,

that we may seek those things which are above,

where he reigns with you

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

**First Reading: Acts 4:5-12**

5The Jewish rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, 6with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. 7When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, ‘By what power or by what name did you do this?’ 8Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers of the people and elders, 9if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, 10let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. 11This Jesus is
 “the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
 it has become the cornerstone.”
12There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.’

**Psalm 23**

The Lord is my shepherd; \*therefore can I lack nothing.

He makes me lie down in green pastures \*and leads me beside still waters.

He shall refresh my soul \*and guide me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; \*

for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; \*

you have anointed my head with oil and my cup shall be full.

Surely goodness and loving mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, \*

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

**Second Reading: 1 John 3:16-24**

16We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

18Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

23And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

**Gospel: John 10:11-18**

Jesus said to the Pharisees: 11‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own 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 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. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.’

**Sermon by Harold Toms**

*An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at* [*Sermons (tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)*](http://www.tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk/sermons.html)

Today, the fourth Sunday of the Easter season is sometimes called: "Good Shepherd Sunday" because the readings in years A, B and C of our lectionary are taken from John chapter 10. As we heard this morning that chapter includes the passage in which Jesus describes himself as "the good shepherd". It is an image that has traditionally captured the imagination of artists and there are many depictions of Jesus as the good shepherd. In former times this would have been an image that needed little explanation, especially in rural societies the idea of the shepherd tending his or her flock; defending the sheep; feeding the sheep; and protecting the sheep would have been easily recognisable in the actions of contemporary shepherds. Everyone would have either known someone who was a shepherd or would at least have encountered a shepherd at work at some point in their life. But, here in the twenty-first century it is unlikely that many, perhaps even any of us know any shepherds. Because as a family we like to take walking holidays I can at least say that I have seen shepherds in action, although the young people on quad-bikes were probably a far cry from what Jesus had in mind when He called Himself the good shepherd.

To get a better idea of what this passage is about it is useful to look at the context in which it is set, going back into the previous chapter to where the narrative starts, and it actually begins with an account of a healing that might seem to have little to do with sheep and shepherds. Chapter 9 gives a detailed account of a man who was born blind, had lived his entire life without sight, being healed by Jesus. The Pharisees give him quite a grilling about who healed him, though they seem most incensed by the fact that the healing was done on the sabbath! We are told that the authorities were so doubtful about this healing that they even call the man's parents to confirm that he really had been born blind, though they (the parents) are so frightened they won't answer and get their son (who is an adult) to answer for himself. He openly tells them that it was Jesus who healed him and that to have done so shows that He (Jesus) must be from God, he simply says:

"... I was blind, now I see." John 9:25

The Pharisees are so infuriated that they drive him out, whereupon Jesus goes to him and the man becomes Jesus' follower. Jesus then begins the "Good Shepherd" narrative, part of which we had as our Gospel reading this morning, from which we can see that Jesus is effectively making a comparison between Himself and the Pharisees and Jewish authorities. The people are the flock (it is an image from the Old Testament that would have been quite familiar) and He is their shepherd, one who truly cares for their well-being and, as we heard at Easter, really is willing to lay down His life for His flock. One aspect of the Easter story, which should still be fresh in our minds, is that when Jesus is arrested He sees to it that only He is taken, all of the disciples and those with Him escape, not one is arrested with Him. By contrast then, the Pharisees and the Jewish authorities are identified with the hired hands who run away from danger because they don't care for the sheep in the way the good shepherd does.

In recent weeks there has been a new television series narrated by David Attenborough which, for me, has thrown further light on this passage about the good shepherd. As is so often the way with such programmes we see nature "red in tooth and claw" with predators hunting herds of potential prey. Almost always the predators need to prise one creature away from the rest in order that they can attack it. The instinct of the heard is to run and scatter, but this only makes them more vulnerable to be picked off by the hunters. With a flock of sheep the shepherd can keep them safe simply through his voice. It is a voice that the sheep have long become familiar with, a voice that they associate with care, safety, food, warmth. So when the flock is under attack it is a voice that they know from experience they can trust, because it is a voice they have known all their life. The shepherd has never let them down.

When Jesus called Himself "the Good Shepherd" He was linking Himself to the one they knew had been with them all their lives. Jewish scripture would have been so familiar that, like us, they would have been able to call to mind the words of Psalm 23, the Psalm that is, of course, appointed to be used today:

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" Psalm 23:1

Both His use of the phrase "I am", the divine name of the Lord, and also His identifying Himself as shepherd for the people complete what the man healed from blindness had testified about Jesus when he said:

"If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." John 9:33

His recognition of Jesus underlines what Jesus says about how His sheep know Him and He knows them. The man had not been one of Jesus followers but became one, not, it should be noted because of what Jesus did for him but, when Jesus came and sought him out after he had been thrown out by the Jewish authorities and Pharisees.

One final important detail from the passage comes in verse 16 where Jesus tells us:

"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

I don't know for sure who these other sheep that Jesus refers to were. It may be that He was talking about gentiles (non-Jewish believers). The point here is that Jesus' flock comprises all those who listen to His voice. We are often tempted to think of Jesus' flock as being those who are like us and believe the same things that we do, but we are not the ones who determine who is in the flock and who isn't. Jesus' flock are all those who recognise and respond to His voice, whom He calls. Sometimes it can feel as though we have little in common with many who call themselves Christian. We cannot, indeed must not judge, Christ alone is the Good Shepherd. He knows His flock and they know Him, though it sometimes may not seem so, there really is just "one flock, one shepherd". Amen.

**Prayers written by Sue Lyne**

Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life our true Shepherd. As we follow in his footsteps we experience the fellowship of his company, which gives us both courage to do his work and peace of mind, even when life is difficult.

We thank you that from the beginning of the world you have watched over and cared for each person, without prejudice to race, ability, health or achievement. We thank you for sending Jesus, the person of perfections, who revealed your love in his healing, forgiving, encouraging, challenging ways. We thank you for filling us with your Spirit of life and love, which enables each of us to know you and love you and speak with you in prayer.

Thank you, God, for all that you have done for us, even when we have not known or appreciated your activity on our behalf. May we show our gratitude to you not only in our words but also in our deeds, so that what we have received may be shared with all whom you love.

Lord, there is so much injustice in your world; injustice in countries, where some are oppressed, exploited, discriminated against, injustice between nations, where some are destitute, hungry, in debt so that others can live too well. Lord, we pray for all those who are the victims of injustice of any kind.

Lord there is so much conflict in the world; conflict in families, leading to deep wounds and unhappiness, conflict in countries, between races, classes, religions, leading to suspicion, violence and fear; conflict between nations, broken relations, skirmishes, wars, leading to great suffering and pain. We pray for peace Lord and wisdom to those in authority that they may bring an end to such conflict.

We pray for our Church that we may grow strong in your love. Give us all wisdom and discernment as we move forward in our faith knowing you are always there for us. Help us to spread your word guiding us in the way that you have mapped out for us. Let us show your love to all who we meet so that you may shine in our lives and be a reflection to others who long for peace and understanding.

We pray for those known to us who may be suffering in mind, spirit or body. We ask for your healing hand to comfort them, especially Alfred Johnson.

We are on this earth for only a short while so give us courage to do your will and when you call us may we be assured of your grace. We pray at this time for the lives of Neville Taylor and Beryl Brand and ask for your presence to be felt by their families in their time of grief. We pray for those who are remembering the loss of their loved ones, Joan & Paddy Duff, Derek Thompson and Richard Mansfield, may they find comfort in their happy memories of time gone by.

Let us have a moment of silence to bring our own individual requests and thanks to God.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your son our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.