

## **Sermon for the First Sunday after Easter 2020.**

Ezekiel 34:11-16. 1 Peter 5:1-11. Psalm 23. John 10:11-18.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

It is very clear that today's Green Book Readings draw our attention to the work and nature of a Shepherd. How many of us have met an actual Shepherd? Most of us would not be too sure whether we have or have not. The chance is that in our rural location in Wales, we will have met a shepherd. In fact, all of us in St Deiniol's have one in our midst from Sunday to Sunday: Steve, who owns the Castle and who rears horses and sheep. So, we are really close to a Shepherd (is he an Horseherd as well?). When farmers are working hard in the lambing, calving and foaling season, they almost invariably say that, despite the exhaustion and lost sleep, they are blessed by witnessing new birth. I suppose most midwives appreciate their vocation in the same way.

The Bible frequently alludes to good and bad shepherds; as illustrated by our portions for today. In Ezekiel 34.11, the Lord God says He will seek out his flock, rescue them, bring them out from among other peoples, bring them into their own land, feed them, bind up the crippled, strengthen the weak, and watch over them. In 1 Peter 5.1ff, Peter enjoins his fellow elders to act as gentle shepherds, not for shameful gain, not domineering over the flock. In Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my Shepherd', leading, refreshing, comforting, anointing and feeding the flock. Then, in John 10, we hear Jesus self-identification as The Good Shepherd. He knows his sheep, and his sheep know him; and the flock that haven't been part of his own flock will heed his voice. 'So there will be one flock, one shepherd.' This unity under the Good Shepherd will be achieved by His own power in laying down his life for them, and taking it up again. This sacrifice is wrapped up in the love of the Father God.

What about the Shepherds you have known? Have they all been prepared to follow Christ's example and lay down anything at all for you, let alone their lives? In our own personal experience none of us will have been aware of the sacrifice of a Pastor's life for us personally, at least not to the point of death. But in other parts of the world, we know that leaders of the faith have done so unto martyrdom. Think of those in the hands of the so-called Islamic State who died facing out to sea on the beach in Libya. Think of Father Maximilian Kolbe who was starved for two weeks in the stead of a married man in a prison camp, before being injected with carbolic to finish him off.

God knows the cost of witnessing to the faith. He knows that his Shepherds can be cowards who need to be steadied by an infusion of spiritual power from on high. That happened to his chief earthly shepherd, Peter, in his threefold denial that he knew Jesus. On the beach after the resurrection (John 21:15ff) Jesus reversed Peter's denial by a threefold injunction to feed Christ's sheep. He reminded Peter that the cost of feeding the sheep would also result in an unwanted self-sacrifice.

So, being a shepherd is a dangerous business. I remember being in a car in the hills of Galilee a few years ago when we came across a group of shepherds sitting down having their lunch. Their dogs launched at the car with such ferocity that I was absolutely terrified. The shepherds looked almost as fierce as their dogs. That's not the usual picture we have of shepherds is it? Nowadays, you won't find lions wandering freely in the wilderness of the Holy Land, but, in biblical times, you could. Shepherds had to be armed with a rod, staff and sling to repel danger. Peter warns the elders of the church that 'your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour' (1 Peter 5.8). Are our shepherds armed and ready to defend us against the dangers of the society in which we are roaming? Are we ready to support them in their dangerous task?

Brothers and Sisters, we are going through a time of trial now. Medical staff and Scientists are trying to find a way to tame the roaring lion as it prowls around attacking people from the weak to the apparently invulnerable. The sheep have been scattered, far from the sheepfold of a local church. But, that means that the sheep must listen for the Shepherd's voice. They can't just run when the flock run. They must think for themselves. They must be attentive. Pray that you will be diligent in seeking the Lord. Set time aside to worship, to praise God for not abandoning us, though times are difficult. Pray for the Shepherds of the Church to be courageous. Pray for our Bishop Damien, for his welfare and wisdom in use of the Internet. Pray for all leaders of the faith to speak truth to a Society that, without Christ, is aimless. Pray for your priest as he seeks the good of our flock, and doesn't know how best to do this.

But, the Lord is our Shepherd, therefore we can lack nothing. Let us remember that the Good Shepherd lay down his life of his own volition, and *also* took it up again. The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. Allelulia.