

Bennochy Church 29th April 2012

Shepherds in biblical times were tough men, who protected their sheep against attack from thieves and wild animals. Men who endured sometimes harsh winter weather as they sat out overnight, or lay across the entrance to the sheep fold, watching their flocks. That is the image of Jesus words, *"I am the door"*, if you want to get to God, i.e. inside the sheep pen, you have to go through Jesus. There is no other way. Being a shepherd was a tough job.

These were men who knew all their sheep by name, led them to find water and they followed, cared for them and if one wandered away, set off to find it and bring it home. In that short description, I am sure you recognised a whole pile of biblical images that describe God and his relationship with their people.

Jesus said, *"I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep"*, and he did. Jesus is no hired man who in the face of danger runs away. The hired man is not the shepherd, Jesus is. The hired man does not care for the sheep, Jesus does. This is a barbed image, for in its original context, the hired men were the unfaithful and bogus religious leaders of the day.

This image is literally one of life and death, for the sheep. Their only protection is their shepherd and it all boils down to who cares enough for the sheep to put themselves in danger. The

wolves are coming, who stays and who runs away (*The Grey* – film clip).

You could almost imagine Jesus pointing to a shepherd as he speaks. There, see that shepherd, he is me, *"I am the good shepherd"*. I wonder what image Jesus would use today in the midst of our urban society. I am the 'good friend' on a social networking site. I am the 'good worker' in a residential care home or nursery. I don't know, but it is interesting to put this image into our context.

Jesus says, *"I am the good shepherd. As the Father knows me and I know Father, in the same way I know my sheep and they know me. And I am willing to die for them"*. History is littered with heroes who have given their lives for others, in the battlefields and to protect family and friends. There have been numerous programs recently remembering the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, the captain who goes down with his ship and those who helped others into life boats, knowing that they themselves would not survive. In today's society would "women and children first" still hold as a principle? In such circumstances what would we do, to protect those we care for? We can speculate, but unless it becomes our experience, we will never know.

But Jesus chose this path in advance. He knew what was coming for him. In spite of crucifixion, he chose to be the Good Shepherd. And even if Jesus knew that he would be raised to

life, it still was not easy path to take. After all he was human and death awaited him. Witness his prayers of agony of spirit in the garden of Gethsemane. Yet, his love conquered fear and death.

But he was also God, so he knew that ultimately no one could actually take his life away. It is God who offers himself freely in Christ, and so God had the right to reclaim it back. I am not sure that I fully understand what I have just said, but that is what God promises in Jesus, the “Good Shepherd”.

Not for one era, one place or one flock does this good shepherd care for his sheep. For Jesus there are always others to welcome, others who will listen to his voice and become part of his one flock. I wonder, what voices, often those who shout loudest, do we listen to today, the politician, the commentator, the celebrity? Do they care for us? If we are lost will they come and find us? If we are in danger will they come and protect us? Yet that is the promise of Jesus. And if the voice of Jesus is to be heard over the noise of the world, who will recognise it, will we? And how will it be heard, whose voice will echo his words? It can only be ours.

In this image we are the sheep who follow in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd. Tentative maybe, possibly lacking in confidence, but may we never lack faith and hope and trust in God, as we proclaim the resurrection of the one who gave his life and who reclaimed it back to himself, ...for us.! Amen.