

A sermon preached by the Revd RL Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton, Maine on the Fourth Sunday of Easter (5/12), 2019

Acts 9: 36-43; Revelation 7: 9-17; John 10:22-30

The fourth Sunday after Easter is, as I find myself pointing out every year, known as “Good Shepherd” Sunday. Inevitably, the Gospel comes from John, a gospel replete with references to shepherds and shepherding, and makes the claim, numerous times, that Jesus is the good shepherd. He is held up, among other images, as one who does not flee from his sheep in the face of danger, who knows them by name, and whose voice the sheep know.

Unfortunately, the image of shepherd has, over the centuries, become rather heavily imbued with far-too-much saccharine...has been cloaked in a sweetness and “cuddliness” which is both inaccurate and which does a disservice to shepherds of the age of John...the age in which these images were used to describe Jesus...his nature and his relationship with those who follow him.

Additionally, for those of us who live in the developed world, the predominant modern-day image of shepherding often is tinged with visions of gigantic herds of sheep...great white blankets...covering vast tracts of land and being herded by incredibly skilled dogs, human beings on horses...even jeeps and helicopters.

Neither of these images is useful in attempting to understand the point of which John writes or which Jesus is making.

The shepherd of Jesus and John’s day was a solitary individual who spent days and weeks in the rural areas of the country...alone with the sheep...and, generally, not all that many of them. He walked in their midst...calling them each by name...trusted by them. This person did not get to bathe...to sleep in a bed...to escape the elements...to sit down to a hearty, warm meal served under a roof...to, in short, find himself (and, in general, the historical witness suggests that shepherds were male)...to find himself in a condition particularly more comfortable than the sheep that were being tended. And, in fact and in addition, he found himself far more insecure and unprotected than the sheep over which he, at least, was watching and trying to protect.

Day after day, the shepherd walked with his charges seeking something upon which for them to graze...green pastures (though, even that, is rather sentimentalized by a far-later vision grown out of images of the England of the Victorian era). The shepherd sought to protect them from sheep thieves...animals that might prey upon them...and the physical dangers of wandering about in a wilderness in which Mother Nature was the predominant force.

And what did the shepherd get in return for this? Not much! Shepherds were the lowest class on in the social hierarchy of the day. Paid practically nothing, abiding out in the middle-of-nowhere, smelling more like their charges than anything else, and ignored, whenever possible, by those with whom they occasionally came in contact...these men were neither the stuff of fluffy Victorian sentimentality nor of the great shepherding of the modern-day.

And it is these men...these shepherds...to whom Jesus seeks to bring his followers to understand he is most akin. It is this for which he strives.

It is perhaps worth recalling that it was shepherds who came to the manger first...the lowest of the low...the least significant of all those who might have come. Even then, in the story of the Incarnation, we are to understand something that it is very easy to forget...or, perhaps better, convenient to forget.

Following Jesus is not to be something grand...marvelous...triumphant. It is to be part of a small flock watched over by one who has chosen...voluntarily chosen...to be one with us. To share our lives...to share our

journeys...to share our discomforts...to share everything we experience...and to know our names and call us by them.

You see, from the moment of his earthly journey's beginning to its ending, Jesus of Nazareth, the Incarnation of that power which brought into being all that was and is and is to come, chose to be one with those for whom he gave his entire life. He came into the world...not in spite of the world...but in full regard of the world...all its struggles, uncertainties, and fears...in order that our journeys...ever single moment of them...might be sanctified...made holy...because he shared, and continues to share, them with us.

He know our names...he knows every hair on our heads...he walks in our midst and will not leave us alone no matter what threatens.

In a world which promises us always the grand...the glorious...the painless...the easy...we have pledged to follow one who knows, as well as we do, how false such promises are. He is one who is not filled with empty promise...but with actions that reveal...in the midst of our journeys...our seeking green pastures...joy...hope...and wholeness...that reveal that there is something that will not let us down...will not desert us...will protect and guard us.

Choosing to follow a shepherd...at least a shepherd rightly understood...is not easy. It means we are putting our faith...our safety...our souls...our lives...in the hands of one who the world holds of little value. But, if we have come actually to see how bankrupt the values of that world can, in great part, be...we may well come to understand that this shepherd is worth following. He cannot protect us from life's difficulties, but he will show us the way to green pastures...and to a salvation the ways of the world cannot even conceive.

I guess it is rather like the words to a hymn that has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. Words written by Mrs LM Willis in 1864:

*Father, hear the prayer we offer:  
not for ease that prayer shall be,  
but for strength, that we may ever  
live our lives courageously.*

*Not for ever in green pastures  
do we ask our way to be ;  
but the steep and rugged pathway  
may we tread rejoicingly.*

*Not forever by still waters  
would we idly rest and stay;  
but would smite the living fountains  
from the rocks along our way.*

*Be our strength in hours of weakness,  
in our wanderings be our Guide;  
through endeavor, failure, danger,  
Savior, be thou at our side.*