

SERMON – 13/9/26

John 10:14-16

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

What is it that you are hearing in this morning's reading, I wonder? Perhaps something that you haven't heard before, perhaps something that surprises you or hits you in a new way. Let me share with you *my* reflections on this passage but also invite you to continue the conversation after the service with one another or with members of the ministry team by meeting with one of us during the week.

As some of you know, at the beginning of September I have two anniversaries and the birthday of a family member to celebrate in very quick succession. One of the anniversaries is our wedding anniversary and the other is the anniversary of my ordination as a minister of Word and Sacrament.

All of you know what it is to mark a birthday – a mixture of joy and thanksgiving on the one hand as you think of the blessings of the years, but also perhaps a tinge of sadness that life is slipping through your fingers. Some of you share the experience of celebrating a wedding anniversary and you will know what it is like to think back not only on the events of a special day, but also on the water that has flowed under the bridge since that day and on all that has happened over the years for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health. Although one or two of you here today also share the experience of marking what some call an ordiversary, for most of you that will be unknown territory. What do ministers do all day anyway? You see and hear us up front on a Sunday and in different public aspects of church life – meetings, funerals, weddings – but most of the time what we do is probably a bit of a mystery. A significant aspect of ministry is pastoral care but perhaps the nature of what that actually means in the church is something that bears reflection.

As we listen for God's Word this morning we are invited to think about Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and it's providential that we have been thinking today too about the work of the Fellowship and Pastoral Team in our congregation, because the word 'pastoral' relates to the work of the shepherd, to the need for the flock to be known and loved, to be led towards green pastures where there is nourishment and teaching, and to be guided away from the temptation to wander from the safety of the sheepfold. Pastoral care is not only the role of the minister of Word and Sacrament but of the whole congregation for we all have a part to play in looking after one another, ensuring that we are spiritually well nourished, that we are guided in the right paths, that we are protected from danger and evil and that we know the blessing of belonging together with others in the fellowship of the Gospel.

Over the years, as ordained ministers have become fewer, as parishes have been grouped in larger and larger units and as the pace of life for everyone has become more and more frenetic, the image of the country parson pottering from house to house around the village keeping in touch with church members, or the city minister receiving a line of parishioners one by one in the vestry of an evening has become less and less realistic. Something I have noted over recent years, however, is that the care of church members for one another has grown organically just as the capacity of ministers to engage in visiting has diminished. That is the gift of God, I believe. I rejoice to see at the close of a service here the little huddles of people chatting over coffee and sharing their life stories with one another in all their joys and sorrows and finding support and encouragement that goes far beyond what one minister could ever have offered over a hand-shake at the door. I am glad when I learn of members of groups within the church – house-groups, Guild, Craft Group, Choir, the list could go on – rallying round one of their number in times of need. Yes, there are times when spiritual guidance and prayer from an ordained minister may be required, (and don't ever hesitate to ask for that for yourself or for someone you know is struggling), but don't let's imagine that that is the only model for pastoral care.

As I reflected on the verses we read and on the context in which they sit, I was prompted to think about two things.

Firstly the idea of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knowing His sheep and the sheep knowing Him, and particularly the sheep following the shepherd because they know His voice. How well do you and I know the Shepherd's voice? Are we able to discern when it is Jesus who is calling us and when it may be a counterfeit, however plausible, persuading us to take the wrong path? Part of what we hope will happen in the coming weeks of this series is that we will each be conscious of what God Himself is asking of us at this time. That is not an exact science and it requires careful and prayerful attention, usually in company and conversation with others, our fellow-travellers on the journey of faith, sometimes the advice of a minister or a prayer partner. Will you join me this month in cultivating a greater attentiveness to the voice of the Good Shepherd.

And secondly, the message that Christ has other sheep who are not of this sheepfold whom He must bring also. Sometimes it is suggested that that is a reference to members of other churches but since in God's eyes there is only one church, I think it goes further than that. One of the questions I was asked at my ordination was this: Are not zeal for the glory of God and a desire for the salvation of all, so far as you know your own heart, your great motives and chief motives to enter into this holy ministry? They are, I replied. And in my 38th year of ordained ministry I think I feel more strongly than ever the yearning to see those who are like sheep without a shepherd – and that is the overwhelming majority in our community – hearing and coming to recognise the voice of Jesus and discovering in Him the gate to life in all its fulness. Jesus says, "They too will listen to the Shepherd's voice and there shall be one flock and one Shepherd." (John 10:16) How will they hear that voice if it is not through us? As Jesus once said, 'If my disciples keep quiet these stones will shout aloud.'

So what is God saying to you this morning? What is the Good Shepherd saying to His church today? Do you have ears to hear and the obedience of faith to follow where the Shepherd leads – to offer care and companionship to those around you and to

reach out to those who as yet do not know the Lord who loves them and gave Himself up for them?

Let's take a moment to be still.

[Silence]

And let's hear those verses one more time.

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."