

Easter 4, St Paul's Cathedral

John 10:11–18

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

Too many shepherds love mutton. Shepherd's Pie should always give a moment's pause for thought, for what is underneath that fluffy white potato topping was the shepherd's duty of care only a while ago.

The reading from John's Gospel is a speech of Jesus' directed to the Pharisees. I suspect that they were less concerned about Jesus calling himself a shepherd than they were by the simple addition of the word 'good'. The very idea that there are bad shepherds is an uncomfortable one, true though it must be, and Jesus very clearly states the difference between the good shepherd and the hired hand, as he calls them.

But what is that difference? The good shepherd is one who knows his sheep because he owns them. That is an extraordinary idea, is it not? The justification for his protective attitude towards his sheep is not because he feels that they are lovely, or that they are cute little creatures, but because he *owns* them.

It is because of this that he is willing to sacrifice his life for them; that is he behaves altruistically.

I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

*The 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.*

We are suspicious of altruism and that is what is being offered today. The shepherd offers a sacrificial love. He is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. His altruism rests on ownership (not a comfortable idea). We live in a world where such relationships are few and more often than not we are suspicious of those who make such claims. Rightly we are suspicious of people who claim us as their own.

But this kind of ownership is like how one might own an idea—whatever happens to it, it was always your idea; it is even part of you: it is own-ship, even if your idea spreads and multiplies. It is of course also like one owns a child; my own son, my own daughter, not to be traded, but to be loved.

This is the kind of love that can get cross at our failures, upset at our lack of trying. It is the kind of love that would, if it could, grab us by the scruff of the neck and help us to see that we can jump that creek.

One of the best priests I have ever worked with is charming and kind, polite and so on, all the things one expects in a priest. But once he gets to know you, he might well get angry. I have seen him bite his lip in anger when dealing with someone. Amazingly he is an excellent priest, for people see that he cares, he really cares.

We are God's own people. He knows us, but do we know God?

One of the more striking things about becoming a parent, and I am still learning, is the knowledge we have of each other. I can remember when my children were very young, the agony of hearing them cry in church. It took me some while to realise that my child's cry cuts through to me like no other, and, secondly, it is good to hear children's cries in church, Where are they again? I can also remember on other occasions when my children were in another room, a child would start to cry and someone would tap my on the shoulder, "is that Toby?" Immediately I could answer, "Oh no don't worry, that's not his cry."

Equally a child learns the voice of its mother, even whilst in the womb. It becomes a voice that can be heard above the hubbub. Just to hear your Mother cry your name is something that can bring you to a halt whatever your age. All of us need to know the voice of the shepherd in the same way, and hear it over the hubbub of modern life.

We still live in a world of shepherds, though each year I suspect their job gets harder and harder. Only yesterday there was news about how lambs are being stolen from farms.

We still live in a world of shepherds. We are surrounded by voices offering to care for us, nurture us, and help us discover our real selves. There are still plenty of shepherds who are willing to herd us through the troublesome lands to the rich pastures of life. Almost trivially we can think about the world of advertising. Apart from the clamour of voices coming to us over the Internet and airwaves, there are still plenty of other voices all wanting to be heard. We live in a dizzying world of choice. All around us there are competing ideas and worldviews. We live, as some have called it, in a supermarket of religions—but whereas in a traditional supermarket the packets stay neatly and quietly on the shelf, these products leap off the shelf, engage you, try to convert you. We sheep (not the most attractive description of us in the Bible) are clearly important enough to be traded. People are after our hearts and minds, as well as our coats.

The fact that there are so many voices, a plural society, is perhaps not as new as we think. There has always been competition over us, there have always been competing ideas and religion, in a way, can be seen as one of the older competitions. This is evidenced in our first reading from Acts where Peter and John have been arrested, we are not told why, but it is clear the authorities are keen to know by what power they have performed their healing. They want to know, not unreasonably, whether they have another competitor on their hands. Peter's speech is one that rankles many, I suspect, for in a way it acknowledges the plurality of the world around us and at the same time makes the most unambiguous of statements.

‘There is salvation in no-one else.’ Not a comfortable text to preach about, especially now in a world where the distance between the world religions is getting less.

But in this world, where there are plenty of voices calling for our attention, we can fool ourselves that sophistication lies in trotting from one shepherd to another, to another, nibbling the grass at each of their feet. There is something admirable about knowing something about world faiths; in fact I suspect it is vital that we Christians do. But what is being asked of us today is to know one voice above all others, to know the one who knows us and to recognise our name when the shepherd calls to us.

I am the good shepherd.

I know my own and my own know me.