

Good Shepherd Sunday

I love the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd but I often wonder whether children & young people living in urban settings miss some of the deeper meaning behind it,.... bearing in mind that shepherds are not commonplace in places so close to Hounslow! When was the last time any of you saw a shepherd - & I'm not including those seen on Countryfile or One man & his dog!

So, I thought, with the help of some of our young people, we might compare and contrast a Good Shepherd of Jesus' day to one in our own and see what lessons and insight we might gain.

Get children to come up – two shepherds (the Good Shepherd & the modern shepherd) and lots of sheep

Lets look at 3 questions – what do they need/ – what sort of equipment/tools? What would they do? What sort of personal qualities do they need?

What do they need; well, let's look at the Good Shepherd first – some sheep (they'd probably be looking after a few landowners' sheep; a rod and staff to stop the sheep from falling off cliffs; sandals; a lamp; a sling and rocks and possibly a fleece jacket. Nothing else.....

Whilst the modern shepherd has an array of tools – work permit; contract of employment stipulating their hours; sheep – now they're probably looking after quite a sizeable flock to make it commercially viable ; colleagues to work shifts with; sheep dogs; a jeep; whistle; water proofs; wellies; torch, shearing machines; gun; mobile phone; electric fence manual and a barn key.

What do they do? well our Good Shepherd spends ALL of his time leading his flock around. He leads them and through his calling they learn to follow his voice. He will lead them to where

there is green pasture for them to eat; to cool and clear water to drink and where the terrain is tricky, he will guide them safely through.

And.... if they are attacked by wild beasts (remember the story of David & Goliath) they will use rocks and a sling, to scare off the beasts and unlike the hired hand, they are willing to lay down their lives for the sheep! Other than that – the spend ALL day & ALL night just chatting with their sheep. So much so, that they couldn't keep the ritual cleansing demands of the Pharisees, so were considered outcasts by society.

Now – what about our modern shepherd? Well, they have to herd their sheep – they don't lead, they train up their sheep dogs to herd them to where it is they want them to go and follow along in a little jeep. They probably went to college to study, as they will need to work with the local vets over the health & well being of the flock; they will need to know how to maintain the electric fences and what plants might be poisonous to sheep; they'll need to report upwards to a manager about the pasture management plans and keep abreast of all the National Union of Farmers directives – so it's a very busy job involving zoom & telephone calls and team meetings; studying the latest information from Defra and completing Excel spread sheets for the landowners and retailers they supply Busy/busy/busy.... But lets just check in with our good shepherd of Jesus' day – you still just chatting to your sheep?

And finally we want to look at **what sort of qualities they need** to have. The Good Shepherd – well, I think he needs to be quite self-contained, happy to spend lots & lots of time without another human being in sight; patient; fearless and brave; gentle, selfless; like being outdoors in all weathers and have tons of endurance.

And what about the modern shepherd? Well, they need to be commercially minded; knowledgeable about sheep and their wellbeing; hard working; comfortable with a blend of manual and desk work; love animals but also being part of a team as there are lots of different players involved in today's flock management.

Thank the children & tell them to sit back down

What does all this tell us? Our readings all speak of a love which is so intimate in nature ("I know my own and my own know me") and transcends that expected of anyone else (the hired hand who runs away at the sight danger) that leaves us, or should leave us, feeling completely assured of God's love and His gentle guiding presence. And I cannot help but think that it touches on something deeply rooted in every single one of us, primordial even – recognising that voice which calls us ever forward; guiding us through the twists and turns of life, helping us know what is right and what is wrong, until it finally calls us home.

We are loved by the Good Shepherd who has no other concern but us...

Amen.