

Leadership - Easter 4, 2023.

The readings today are pretty much all about sheep, and so I could be forgiven if this sermon sounds a bit wooly.

What do we think of when we think of sheep? Some fluffy, happy lamb, gambolling in a Spring pasture? Some helpless, feeble brainless creature? Mint sauce, perhaps?

But not, probably, tough, independent fishermen, or self-interested tax collectors, or half-crazed, rebellious zealots, hell-bent on killing Romans. These men would have minds of their own - not the sort of people who would thoughtlessly follow the first person who spoke to them. So what was it about Jesus

that made these men just drop everything and follow him?

When I was at Britannia Naval College in Dartmouth, England, doing my officer training, we were given quite a lot of instruction on leadership. In one of the lectures we were shown a Venn diagram of three overlapping circles, and the three titles of the circles were, 'Achieve the Task; Build the Team; and Develop the Individual.' It is a great piece of advice, and for those in leadership positions, well worth trying to follow. I suggest that Jesus achieved all three in one sentence in Mark 1:17, where he says, 'Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.'

He gives a clear imperative - 'Come, follow me,' and then tells them what he **WILL** do for them - not might do for them; so that's achieving the task. He tells them - along with James and John, only three verses later - what new project he has for them collectively - thus he builds the team; and he says that it is something each of them will accomplish - so developing the individual.

Note also that Jesus is quite abrupt; he doesn't say, 'I say, chaps, when you've finished counting your fish, would you fancy a stroll along the sand and I'll tell you about a cracking new scheme I've thought up?' He says three words only; 'Come, follow me...' And they do - instantly, as Mark tells us.

Now I want to tell you about the difference between leading and driving sheep.

To start with, the two actions are totally different, and each person has a different name. A 'shepherd' leads his or her sheep, and a person who drives his or her sheep ahead of them is called a 'shepherd'.

The shepherd leads his sheep by voice and because the sheep trust and know him; the shepherd gets the sheep to go where he wants because the sheep are afraid of him and his dogs, who are chasing them up from behind.

You will note that we hear very little about sheep dogs in the bible; there is a short

reference to them in Job 30, where Job says,
"But now they mock me,
men younger than I,
whose fathers I would have disdained
to put with my sheep dogs."

Dogs were regarded as dirty and flea-ridden and smelly - so shepherds were also looked down upon as not socially acceptable. Curious, then, that Jesus should use such imagery so much in his teaching - but then he was preaching to a rural and poor community most of the time.

You should also know the use of the shepherd's crook, if you don't know it already. The curved hook with the outgoing point is designed to assist in pulling out a sheep that is stuck in a

bog, without hurting its neck. Psalm 23 has our shepherd with a 'rod and staff'. Now this may be one and the same thing, or the rod may be a short-handled club, used for defending the sheep against predators. Mostly, however, it is regarded as one and the same piece of equipment - the one end to save the sheep from drowning or being stuck in the mire, and the other end to drive away any animals trying to attack the flock.

You may wonder why a bishop has a shepherd's staff - although it is now a plastic sectional reconstruction, whereas mine is the real deal - given to me by my uncle who was a GP in rural

Devon before he died, and for whom it was made by a local shepherd called Bill Legassic.

It is used as a symbol of authority now, but this is strictly speaking incorrect, as it was the tool of the herdsman or pastor, who is the elder or clergy person of a local church or parish, and nowadays should be taken as a symbol of stewardship - not one of authority; read Titus 1:7, which, although the Greek uses the word 'episkopos', that we now translate as 'bishop', would not have been the grand position it is now.

The word is used in the New Testament in several places; of Jesus, as the shepherd and guardian (episkopos) of our souls, like in

Wisdom 1:6, where God is referred to as the 'inspector' (episkopos) of a man's heart.

Again in the NT, Paul talks of the Christians at Philippi 'with their bishops and deacons', here meaning 'overseers'; and once more in Acts 20:28 where he says, "Take heed to yourselves and to the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit has placed you as bishops to rule the Church of God"; but here he uses the word 'presbyter', meaning 'elder'.

In the early Church, no distinction was made between bishops and priests - both were referred to as 'presbyters'. Which really just means the elders of the Church. It certainly wasn't the monarchical system of hierarchy that we have today.

But I want to go back a bit to the calling of the first disciples by Jesus - as the Good Shepherd.

First, he must have had enormous and irresistible charisma; three words, and four men's lives were changed for ever. How I wish I could do that for this church!

But again - it was attraction and not coercion that brought Peter, Andrew, James, and John to him. A complete stranger - and you are prepared to leave everything to follow this unknown, but somehow holy, mendicant. Jesus must have had both an air of authority as well as giving the people he spoke to a sense of safety and comfort. We never see anyone running away from Jesus in fear; true, we see

some turning away in confusion, guilt, and embarrassment, and also because they just cannot give up the pull of this world's trinkets and baubles - or prefer to stay with the hypocritical vainglory of the Pharisees.

Where, I wonder, do you and I fit into the flock that Jesus is calling? Are we even prepared to hear his voice - or are our earbuds pounding out the latest noise that purports to be music into our ever-softening brains, and deafening us to the still, small voice of Christ? I have played for you the song, 'If Jesus comes tomorrow, what then?' fairly recently; I feel the need to tell you that Jesus' Holy Spirit is here, now - and if you can only be

bothered to pull out your mental earbuds and listen to his voice - you might just find that 'He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.'

You would also find that you are not frightened of the stick that he carries; '...your rod and your staff, they comfort me,' they are reassuring to me, so that you are no longer afraid, and 'Even though I walk

through the darkest valley,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

Then we can say together, 'The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.'

Let me ask you just one thing: 'Do you have the courage to actually listen to His voice?'

Your life will change for ever if you do...