22 April 2018: Choral Eucharist
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Psalm 23; Acts 4: 5–12; 1 John 3: 16–24; John 10: 11–18
The Revd Canon Dr Edmund Newey, Sub Dean

By tradition this fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday: ‘I am the good shepherd’, says Jesus to the Pharisees in today’s gospel. But how many of us have ever met a shepherd or have much knowledge of sheep except from the other side of a hedge? Many of the great mediaeval churches of our diocese were built on the profits of sheep. But nowadays most of us know precious little about the reality of sheep farming, apart perhaps from a few hazy memories of that excellent programme, One Man and his Dog.

In the history of human civilisation this makes us decidedly peculiar. To be as cut off as we are from the reality of sheep and shepherding is very odd. Certainly there have been cultures which despised shepherds: the ancient Egyptians regarded shepherds as dirty and kept them at a safe distance, while still of course eating lamb and wearing wool. And in Jesus’s day too, shepherds were regarded as inferior: the shepherds whom Luke records as the first visitors to the infant Christ were social outcasts - that they came and worshipped him was an early sign of the pattern that Jesus’s adult ministry would follow. But, whatever some cultures have thought of shepherds, the history of sheep farming is almost as old as the history of the human race and to know as little about it as we do is really a phenomenon limited to western society of the last hundred years. The book of Genesis, with its broad-brush picture of the beginnings of human civilisation tells us that Abel, the second son of Adam and Eve, was the first shepherd: ‘Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain [his brother] a tiller of the ground’. Obviously this isn’t literally true – humans spent centuries as hunter-gatherers before we discovered agriculture – but it reminds us very clearly of the important bonds that exist between the human race, the animals we keep and the ground we till.
In the world of the Bible, sheep and goats were by far the most important domestic animals. The scriptures constantly refer to them. The great patriarchs spent much of their lives as shepherds: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Rachel and their sons, Moses and David. The prophets often use sheep as an image of the defencelessness of the people of Israel without God’s protection; and they commend their trust and obedience. Likewise the shepherd’s care for his flock is a common biblical metaphor for God’s steadfast love for his people, most famously in the psalm we sang today: ‘The Lord is my shepherd…’. It’s against this background of close personal knowledge and repeated scriptural reference that we should hear Jesus’s words in today’s gospel.

But, even if we take all of this into account, we’re still not in a position fully to understand what Jesus means when he says, ‘I am the good shepherd’. To us his words sound rather bland to us; to his first hearers bland is the last thing they would have been: they would have struck home as radical, perhaps even offensive. Nobody before in the history of the Jewish people, nobody anywhere in the scriptures, had ever dared to say that he himself was the good shepherd. The word translated ‘good’ means something more like ‘perfect’ or ‘true’. Recall the man who comes to Jesus in Mark’s gospel and asks him, ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus replies, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good, but God alone’. God alone, then, is good, perfect, true; and when Jesus says, ‘I am the good shepherd’, he is telling the Pharisees that he is one with God: ‘I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father’.

I am very drawn to the image of Christ as the good shepherd. I think most of us are. It suggests a kindly and benevolent Jesus; it makes us think of the tune Crimond and the great metrical versions of the twenty-third psalm that we love to sing. There is nothing wrong with such images: we all need the blessed assurance they give us of God’s unstinting love for us in Christ. But today’s gospel from John chapter ten actually has very little to do with the twenty-third psalm. This is a speech delivered as part of Jesus’s ongoing confrontation with the Pharisees and it is intended to provoke. To provoke and to condemn those, like the Pharisees, who fail to recognise Jesus for who he is. It is a speech that condemns the hired hands, who ‘see the wolf coming and leave the sheep and run away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them’.
Who are the hired hands? On one level they are obviously the Pharisees, who with their practised evasions and hypocrisy, evade the demands of true obedience to the word of God. But before we leave it at that, shouldn’t we ask ourselves again: who are the hired hands? Could they not also be us? Could they not, perhaps especially, be people like me, who are paid to be religious: hired hands of the Church? We are not, at least I hope we are not, the wolves who scatter the sheep. But all of us, at least at times, behave like hired hands: good enough in following Christ’s call when the going is easy; filled with fear when difficulties come our way.

‘I am the good shepherd’. There is much comfort in this great ‘I am’, one of a whole series of sayings in John’s gospel: ‘I am the true vine’, ‘I am the light of the world’, ‘I am the resurrection and the life’. But it is a comfort that demands a great deal of us. Yes, we are beloved children of the Father; brothers and sisters of Christ; sheep of the flock that he has redeemed.

But, knowing Christ to be the good shepherd, the true, the perfect shepherd, requires of us not just passive acquiescence but active love and service: that all people may come to know Christ the good shepherd, and that, in his words, there may be ‘one flock, one shepherd’.