

Dear Friends,

I hope you are continuing to stay positive as this lengthening lockdown shows no sign of ending any time soon. It has been reassuring as I have talked to a number of you that people are rallying around those who are self-isolating and ensuring that shopping and other essentials are being covered. It really does seem that community spirit is being reactivated as it has in past times of crisis.

In this week's gospel reading (John ch10 vs1-10) we are reminded of the familiar picture of the shepherd of the sheep. In the Old Testament we find the idea of God as the shepherd of his people, the people of Israel. Jesus took over that image which would have been very familiar to those he spoke to. Life for a shepherd was hard at the time that Jesus lived. The shepherd had to be out with his sheep all the time keeping watch. The shepherd couldn't leave his flock to roam the hillsides. It was much too dangerous for that, there were too many wild animals about, there were too many places where the sheep could fall and injure themselves. So the shepherd had to be constantly awake and vigilant.

The picture of the shepherd is a picture of patient love and continuing care and guarding. These sheep were not bred to be eaten, they were kept for the wool they produced, so they were kept by the shepherd for years. The shepherds did get to know their sheep individually, because the flocks weren't that large and they kept their sheep for a long time. That may put something of a question mark about those mega churches that exist in some places round the world where the membership is numbered in many thousands.

So the picture of the shepherd is a picture of care and protection. But it's also a picture of leadership and guidance. In Palestine shepherds travelled at the front, they led the sheep. In this country we're used to shepherds going behind the sheep with their sheepdogs. In Palestine the shepherd would be at the front leading the sheep to new pastures. The land there wasn't that fertile, it quickly became overgrazed, so the flock was frequently on the move. The sheep did recognise their shepherd's voice and they did follow where he led them. Jesus the Good Shepherd is a picture of how he cares for us but also how he leads and guides us forward.

With best wishes,

Mark