

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year C) 7<sup>th</sup> May 2022

Today, The Fourth Sunday of Easter, is Good Shepherd Sunday – every year we read about the Risen Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The image is a very familiar one, but it is still capable of surprising us. Lets look for a moment at this brief Gospel passage, which is one that we know well. But it is worth a closer look.

*'The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice: I know them and they follow me.'* If the sheep follow Jesus because they listen to his voice, you would expect him to say 'They know me, so they follow me'. But he doesn't, he says 'I know *them* and they follow me' – it seems as if it is the wrong way round. What is that about?

Jesus is saying to his disciples that it is massively significant that he knows them: he knows each of them individually, he knows all their foibles and their eccentricities, he knows all the things that make them happy, and all the things that make them anxious. He is not caring for a single flock of undifferentiated sheep, he knows each one of them separately, closely, intimately. The sheep follow him because he knows *them*, and it is good when someone knows you, someone has taken the time to learn about you, has understood what makes you tick. For Jesus the heart of shepherding lies not in making sure that the sheep know the shepherd, but making sure that the shepherd knows the sheep.

So this is not just a story telling the bishops and priests to be better shepherds (although it is partly that, and quite right too), it is principally a story challenging us all to be better sheep. If we want to be known by the Good Shepherd, the principal shepherd, the shepherd from whom all others derive their role, we need to communicate. We need to open our hearts to him, we need to let him know what goes on within.

The Risen Jesus wants to shepherd us. He wants to come looking for us in all the marshy ground where we have wandered, all the brambles and the thorns where we have become trapped, the cliffside that frightens us or the stream that we have become stuck beyond. He wants to find us and carry us home to the clear, clean pasture that he has always intended for us.

Nothing pulls more effectively on the heartstrings of God than a sheep that bleats its need. I am stuck in a hedge, trapped on a cliff, I am just lost. The sheep/ shepherd relationship works best when the sheep call out to the shepherd, so that he can truly know them. 'I know them, truly know them, know them deeply and completely, and so they follow me.' It is good to know another person, but it is even better to be known by them and loved for all that. Someone who knows you, and cares, is someone worth following. You will trust them to lead you to safety, you will want to stick close to them because you will not want to lose that sense of being known, and so you will certainly follow them.

So this simple little story, that turns out to be a little more complex, repays a careful reading. It nudges us to spend some time in prayer in which we open our hearts to Christ, the Good Shepherd, and allow him to really know us. What are the things that we really long for, the

dreams that excite us, the hopes that we have? Tell him, it is good to be known. What are the things that frighten us, the things we find difficult to face? Tell him, it is good to be known. What are the things that we feel bad about, the things we regret bitterly, the things we wish we had never said or done? Tell him, it is good for him to know even these because there is little more liberating than to realise that someone knows even the worst about us, but loves us through it all. How are you feeling at this moment? Tell him, because he longs to hear. What are the things that you do not quite have the courage to do at this moment? Tell him, because being known by him might just be enough to tip you into action.

The Good Shepherd longs to know us. That is why he came to live among us, so that he could enter deeply into our lives, experience our experiences, feel our feelings, walk beside us both in the shadow of darkness and in the rich fertile pastures of joy. If Good Shepherd Sunday was really just a message for the shepherds, it wouldn't have a great deal to say to most of the people in this church. But thankfully it is much richer than that. It does contain a message for the shepherds, but much more than that it has a message for the sheep. It is a call to prayer, not to the sort of prayer that batters the gates of Heaven with requests, but the sort of prayer that goes something like: 'Lord, I just don't know where to begin. But I know that you want to know me very deeply, and I want that too, so let me tell you where I am right now...'