

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> April

Acts 4:5-12

1 John 3:16-end

John 10:11-18

How good is your memory? I suspect its much better than you think – especially when prompted

Certain phrases stick in the mind.

When we hear them we are instantly reminded of things we have heard, read or experienced.

For example - If I said to you

**You turn if you want to - The lady's not for turning** – what would you say?

And if I said **They think its all over – it is now**

**Peace in our time**

**One small step for man**

But if we said those self same words to people who were not brought up in the UK – with the probable exception of the Neil Armstrong one – they would be not be recognised, so there would be nothing that came to mind..

Each culture has different collective memories.

And of course it was the same in Jesus time.

When Jesus said the words ***I am the Good Shepherd*** the people who were listening would not have thought of a gentle shepherd with a cute little lamb over his shoulders (which is what may well come to our mind); they would have thought about kings, rulers, authority figures. In the Old Testament, which his hearers would have known inside out, the idea of a shepherd and his sheep was often used to illustrate the relationship between the king and the people. It would have been a familiar image

There is a key chapter in the OT – Ezekiel chapter 34 – where this comparison between kings and shepherds is expanded and developed. In that chapter there is a

condemnation of the shepherds of Israel for their greed and self interest; for their uncaring attitude towards those supposed to be in their care. And there is a promise that one day God will establish a shepherd who will **really** care for the people; who will put the people first; who will love them as God loves them. In that chapter Ezekiel sketches out what a perfect, a model shepherd – or model king - would look like.

So when Jesus said “I am the Good Shepherd” his hearers would have immediately known what he was really saying. I am the model king, your true king. – the one spoken of by the prophet Ezekiel. And my rule will be a just and gentle rule. I will put your wellbeing above all and, like a shepherd, will be willing to place my life on the line for yours.

This was a dangerous and provocative and very political statement – it was a direct challenge to the rule and authority of the religious leaders.

So if that is what the statement *I am the good shepherd* is all about perhaps we need to ask ourselves - what can we – some 2000 years later - learn from it? How will it make a difference in the way we live; in our culture; in our situation?

And the first difference it will make is about Jesus being our King. Jesus often speaks about the Kingdom of God, and Jesus himself being King is surely the key to understanding what that is all about. If we live with Jesus as our king, then the lives we lead will be the kinds of lives that reflect this and show others what he is like – in other words lives that describe the Kingdom of God. But we first have to rid ourselves of our ingrained ideas of kingship. We need to get back to that shepherd king concept – the king who cares for his subjects and will do all he can to protect them.

Accepting Jesus as our king means doing what he tells us to do; no longer being driven by our own desires, but being motivated by his love. Putting his concerns and his mission above everything. Handing our lives over to him. But this isn't a scary concept precisely because he is the shepherd king, the all loving king, the one who will look out for us and care for us always – even giving himself totally for us. The one who always wants the best for us.

But its much more than just about being a kind king or a benevolent dictator. The gospel goes on to say:

*I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.*

There is a deep and intimate knowledge here. Just as Jesus and his Father are one, Jesus is one with us. He knows us inside out, and we have the opportunity to know him. Perhaps the first half of that statement is less challenging than the second. Perhaps we can imagine the model shepherd king knowing us inside out. But us knowing him? Does that sound beyond belief to you?.

But it is what he promises. And it happens through spending time with him. Through prayer; through Bible reading; through just being in his presence. In a few weeks we are running a Pathways to Prayer event to give us a broader understanding of what prayer is and can be. A chance for us to get to know Jesus better. There are some details with today's pewslip – please read them

But there is still more. After he has said that he is the good shepherd – the true king Jesus goes on to say “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold”

The message here is that our vision of God and his people can be too small. The Jewish nation knew that they were God's chosen people, but they failed to grasp that God had chosen them not because they were special, but because he had a special job for them to do. He always wanted them to be the ones who would demonstrate his love to the rest of the world, who would seek to tell others about him and encourage them to get to know him. But the people of Israel failed. Time and time again they got stuck with thinking they were special; time after time they failed to recognise God had a mission for them to proclaim him to the wider world.

Here Jesus is saying that part of him being the Good Shepherd, the true king is that we will see the truth that his kingship is over all. For the Jews listening to him this must have looked very challenging. We note in the Acts of the Apostles how hard this was for the early church as they began to realise that God was for all people and not just for the Jews.

And it will be a challenge for us too as we begin to realise that even here in Shirley God's concern is for everyone. That he would love people from all over to come into our churches – St James, St John's and Christ the King – and come to recognise him as king and follow him. And I am sure that most of us would rejoice at that happening – but if and when it does happen we will also need to be ready to change to embrace new people and together to work at what being subjects to Jesus' kingship really means. Just as those first Jewish Christians had to change as Gentiles joined the churches. And that may well be quite hard for us. Someone once said that whenever someone new joins a church, the church changes. Each and everyone of us makes a difference

And one more thought on the shepherd king. Right at the end of John's gospel we have the story of Jesus asking Peter three times if he loved him. We have probably always seen this as a kind of making amends for the three times that Peter denied Jesus. But each time Jesus asks, and each time Peter responds Jesus commands him "feel my lambs" or "feed my sheep". Jesus passes on to Peter some of that shepherd role. It reminds me of what the Bishop says at an induction service for a new vicar. "Receive the cure of souls which is both yours and mine". This caring, this loving, this shepherding is a task in which we all share. And it's a task which, as we have seen, extends wide into the community. We follow the example of the shepherd king as we live lives in his service.

I guess it might be quite easy to think of how we can shepherd those we know – and I think the church in Shirley is very good at this as we care for each other. But it's much more challenging to think of what it might mean to shepherd those on the edges; those we meet occasionally, those who might be seen to be on our fringes or even beyond that. And it's to that challenge that we as churches need to rise to if we are truly to accept him as our king. It means going beyond people who are like us; going amongst those who are different. It can be scary and uncomfortable, but that is what is being said here.

So "I am the Good Shepherd" is far less about sheep and shepherds and far more about what it means for Jesus to be the true king, and for us to be people who accept him as King. People who submit our lives to him, knowing that what he asks us to do will always be in our own best interest. People who commit ourselves to knowing him better and better. People who work with him in extending his kingdom to all. People who share in that shepherding task of caring for and showing God's love to all.