

It has often been said that the Bible was written to be heard as well as read. That is not surprising as the scriptures were first brought together as oral tradition and when they were first written down, most people would have experienced the Scriptures as something that was read to them.

Of course, Jesus himself was heard rather than read. From the Gospel accounts as we have them, Jesus taught with stories, with images that would have connected with the daily experiences of his hearers. Take our Gospel reading for this Fourth Sunday of Easter; Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd.

The shepherd would have been a familiar figure in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, one who lived with his flock. He would have slept out in the fields with them, protecting them from danger. It would have been something of a nomadic existence as he led them from pasture to pasture. The shepherd would get to know his sheep and his sheep would get to know the shepherd. This was brought home to me in the course of a visit Rachel and I made to Israel some twenty five years ago. The group we were leading had just celebrated a lovely Communion Service out in the open, on the hills overlooking Lake Galilee and we were resting as we waited for our bus to come and pick us up. While we were waiting a shepherd went by walking ahead of his flock. One of the flock stayed behind to taste some tasty morsel. When he looked up the flock was nowhere to be seen, just us looking at him. Starting to panic, the poor thing bleated furiously. From the distance came the sound of the familiar voice of the shepherd; and the straggler rushed off towards that familiar voice to re-join the flock.

I was struck by the intimacy of that relationship. The shepherd knew his own and his own knew the voice of the shepherd. If you think about it there was no point at which the straggler ceased to be part of the flock. There was no point at which the shepherd ceased to listen out for the straggler.

Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd. The word that the Gospel writer uses builds on this intimacy I am thinking about. The word we translate as ‘good’, καλός, also carries the meaning of attractive, of beautiful. Jesus as the beautiful, the attractive shepherd. The one who hears the voice of the one who has strayed off; the one to whom the hurt, the vulnerable, the indifferent are drawn.

I have a poster on the wall of the Hyland Room in the Parish Centre of Rembrandt’s Return of the Prodigal. Like the lamb wandering off, the story of the Prodigal Son is a story of separation and return. Maybe the son had turned his back on the father, maybe he had even stopped thinking or caring about the father. But it is clear from the story that the father never stopped thinking and caring about him, never stopped looking out for the return of his wayward son. In time, the son, returns to his senses and heads home rehearsing the abject apology he was going to make to his father as he offered himself as a household servant.

But he was still the father’s son. The father, clearly watching out for the son, rushes out to meet him. The son’s carefully rehearsed apology is smothered by

a father's love as the son is welcomed, thoroughly undeserved in his own right, back into his place as son in the family.

The shepherd always on the look out for the flock, the father constantly looking out for his returning wayward son – both these are powerful illustrations of that fundamental truth of God that we read in the letters of John. 'God is love'. That is more than just God loves us. God is love, love is part of the very nature of the one who created us, who redeemed us.

Loved by God, we are sent out into the world to love as he would have us love. I return to Jesus' characterisation of himself as the 'Good Shepherd'; the Good Shepherd, the beautiful, the attractive shepherd. There must be a beauty, an attractiveness to our Christian life, to the witness we bear in the world in which we live. Loved by God, we are called to love those who need our love, those in need. We are also called to love the unlovable, the undeserving, those who would hurt and abuse our love.

In the words of a blessing I would sometimes use:

Go forth into the world in peace;  
be of good courage;  
hold fast that which is good;  
render to no one evil for evil;  
strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak;  
help the afflicted; honour everyone;  
love and serve the Lord,  
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit;  
and the blessing of God almighty,  
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
be among you and remain with you always.

