



Vocation Sunday Sermon – The Rt Revd Cherry Vann

The fourth Sunday of Easter is traditionally known as ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’. The gospel is usually taken from the 10th chapter of the gospel according to St John, in addition to which, one of the collects as well as the post communion prayer for the day refer to Jesus as the faithful shepherd; the good shepherd. Today, the theme is also picked up in the psalm – psalm 23 – which begins with those well known words, ‘The Lord is my shepherd, therefore I shall not want.’

The image of shepherding and sheep is one that runs through the Old Testament. God is described in terms of being a shepherd as early as the book of Genesis; caring for and protecting Jacob and his descendants. David, who became one of the greatest of the Israelite kings, began his life as a shepherd and memorably used the skills he’d honed in protecting his sheep from the threat of bears and lions to kill the mighty Goliath with a single strike of a stone to the forehead.

In describing himself as the ‘good’ shepherd, Jesus was contrasting himself with the bad shepherds who are railed against by God in the 34th chapter of the book of Ezekiel. Here, God prophesies against the leaders of Israel – the shepherds put in charge of caring for and protecting God’s people – because they’d chosen to put themselves first; feeding themselves rather than the sheep in their care, not caring for the injured and the sick, and failing to protect their sheep from wild animals.

Jesus, the good shepherd, models himself on the Lord of Psalm 23 – the one who meets his people’s every need; making them lie down to rest, leading them to still waters, protecting and comforting the flock from evil, even in the darkest of times.

It’s not surprising that the image of a shepherd is used in the ordination services of both priests and bishops. As ministers and leaders of the church, they’re urged to pattern their lives on that of the good shepherd and to



exercise a ministry of caring and protecting, of feeding and nurturing, of leading and guiding the people of God.

But of course, although priests and bishops exercise a ministry of shepherding, they also, in a very real sense, remain sheep: looking to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, for their own nourishment and nurturing, relying on him to lead and guide them (as they lead and guide others), trusting him for their care and protection.

Because the image of shepherds and shepherding is so strongly linked with the leadership roles in the church, the 4th Sunday of Easter, has also come to be known as Vocations Sunday: a day when Christians are invited to reflect on whether God might be calling them into some form of authorised ministry in the Church. When I was growing up, this was thought of solely in terms of men being called into ordained ministry. Now, the call is much broader and the opportunities to serve much wider. The church welcomes and encourages both women and men to offer themselves both for ordained and authorised ministries. And so today, thank God, we see women and men serving not only as bishops, priests and deacons, but as licenced lay ministers and in a whole range of more informal ministries at all levels in the life of the local church and more widely in chaplaincy roles in all manner of secular institutions.

In the 3rd verse of psalm 23, we read ‘He leads me in right paths..’ That doesn’t just mean in being a good and faithful Christian, but in exercising the kinds of ministries and callings that he has equipped us for. Each of us has to discern what is the right path for us – the path that God is leading us along; the particular ministry or outworking of our life of faith that is right for us, now.

Some people are clear from a relatively young age that God is inviting them to take up ordained ministry. For others, that call comes later. For others still, it’s a call not to ordained ministry but to some form of licensed or commissioned ministry. Many of course, faithfully exercise a ministry that is not formally authorised at all, but is needed and valued nonetheless – a ministry of friendship and welcome; a ministry of cleaning and maintaining good order; a ministry of accounting, of beautifying the church, of nurturing children and young people as a Sunday School teacher and a whole range of other ministries that are exercised in the home, in the workplace as well as in the church.



Today you are invited to consider whether the Good Shepherd is calling you into some form of formal ministry. What is the right path for you, now? Might God be calling you to explore ordained or licensed lay ministry or to offer your gifts and skills and experience in a particular role in the local church, the Ministry Area or the diocese?

Each of us has a ministry, a calling, a particular way of living out our Christian life – and sometimes that ministry grows, develops, changes in ways that can surprise and sometimes terrify us. But the Lord is my shepherd, therefore I shall not want. He leads me in right paths, for his names' sake.

May the Good Shepherd lead each of us along the path he would have us go and, as we hear his voice, may we faithfully follow.

