**SERMON**

21st April 2024 – St Thomas’

***‘Sheep ID- Good Shepherd Sunday***

***F.S.HS.***

Ever get nervous when the airport checks your ID? Especially at those Asian airports where you run the risk of life in jail because you forgot to dispose of that banana at the terminal? Or simply because you dared to smile at the official?

Time feels eternal as they look at your passport photo…then at your *current* face (especially that crumpled one that’s been on the plane all scrunched up for 10hrs!)..they look back at the passport photo (in confusion I’m sure) and back at your face….the false guilt rises & real fear has you imagining what it’s like in an Asian jail….never to see your family again…never to eat your favourite food again…never again to enjoy privacy and freedom.

And then, just before you resign yourself to writing letters back home and washing dishes for 10c an hour…the official nods their head and you’re through! You made it! They agree that you really are who you say you are! Phew…that was a close call you think! You’d done nothing wrong…but for that split second…your identity was called into serious question!

And its identity that I want to look at, today on ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’ – not our facial identity but our *sheep* identity. Jesus calls us his sheep…sheep that hear *his* voice, sheep that have a name, and sheep who ignore strangers and *only* follow the Shepherd…*Jesus himself.*

Now I’m not too happy being likened to a sheep. Sheep are perceived as dumb and docile, and *my* *ego* says otherwise!

But their docile nature has made them emblems of peaceful co-existence and they have this ability to accept guidance from an authority figure. They also have this intensely gregarious social instinct enabling them to bond closely to other sheep…preferably from their own flock. And they are actually, despite popular belief, intelligent animals, with a great memory (able to recognise up to 50 other sheep faces – and some human faces – for as long as 2years! Not sure about you, but I struggle to remember someone’s name from last week!).

In contrast to wolves (one of their main enemies) they are *harmless* animals. They don’t hunt for meat, but graze on grass. And they don’t possess a way to defend themselves…they’d rather *run* from a fight because they are *gentle* creatures. They are more prey species and their only defense… is… to flee.

They sound pretty decent don’t they? Sociable, calm, peaceful, safe *and…* dependant on their master! Just how Jesus likes *us*! But, given our human condition, we’re more like the wolf! (Or at least like the wolf in sheeps clothing…and now we’re back to the scary ID checkpoint trying to prove who we say we are…genuine sheep. Because it’s sheep that Jesus wants, not wolves.

But we become like wolves when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death don’t we? It’s understandable. When we receive bad medical reports, endure addictions and overwhelming anxiety, when marriages frustrate and ageing depresses us…whatever that negative shadow is called that makes us trudge through the low valleys’…we relinquish our true sheep identity.

Our hearts constrict in fear as we struggle to manage the shadow of bad news…we become defensive and withdraw…we stop looking for the Shepherd to lead the way…we’re too busy to allow him to lead us back to green pastures, & besides still waters…so that He can again, refresh our souls and realign our paths marked by *His* life. We just don’t have the time for that!

And we stop turning to our fellow sheep for support…and we howl rather than bleat! We become who we are *not*. Even our faces change under the stress… our voices and language are more offensive and our behaviour more aggressive…we become isolated and self-sufficient. It’s a sure-fire recipe for disaster living like a scared wolf!

And so, we struggle to hear and respond to *the* Voice that leads and protects. The *softer* Voice of our Shepherd gets drowned out… and often muted amidst the cacophony of other competing harsher voices that shout, seduce and sabotage rather than nourish our lives.

And off we go like lost sheep, like black sheep, to find new pastures… to find greener grass…because we just can’t stand this brown mealy grass that lacks nutrition.

Competing voices and being time poor are not the only reasons are not the only reasons to develop selective hearing! Those are the obvious reasons. I think there are 3 more.

1. ONE…Jesus is not saying what we *expect*! That was true of the disciples in today’s gospel reading. They were right there, listening to Jesus. But they didn’t really hear him, because he was not saying what they expected to hear. They expected the Messiah to act differently. They thought he’d be like King David, and lead them into battle to overthrow Rome. But Jesus is different. He’s ***counter-cultural.***
2. TWO….We are too *ashamed* to listen! Our sin and guilt causes us to feel unworthy of Jesus speaking to us, so we fail to hear him (like Adam and Eve hiding in shame after they committed the first sin). But Jesus is different. ***He’s forgiving.***
3. And THREE… He is saying something we don’t *want* to hear! Remember [Jonah](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jonah+1&version=NRSV)…fleeing from Nineveh? And the rich young ruler… refusing to sell his many possessions to give to the poor? We resist the call. Jesus is different. ***He’s challenging.***

So we don’t really want to go *where* the shepherd is calling us to go, or do what the shepherd is calling us to do. We too easily give up listening to him. Often when this happens, we need something to happen in our lives that *forces* us to listen. Our own version of finding ourselves in the belly of the whale. The astonishing thing, of course, is that sometimes God does send a whale. Or speaks through some other life event.

C.S.Lewis said that,

*“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a dead world.”*

Sometimes, *that* is the only way we can hear him.

Thank God, that despite ignoring his voice, his voice *persists.* Because until we hear and respond to that voice, we remain restless and unsettled. So let’s be like the first disciples who were *devoted* to worshipping and praying together.

A devotion that not only promises to keep us from going astray, but a devotion that equips us…on ‘Vocation Sunday’ to be the priesthood of believers…where all believers (not just the clergy) are called to lead others to Jesus so that we too will see the Lord add to *our* numbers of those being saved…saved to enter the promise of an abundant life…a life where goodness and loving-kindness *will* follow us *all….& not just some…but allll…..* the days of our lives.

So…*let’s* ***be*** *the sheep*! We don’t have to be the Lion – that’s God’s job! We don’t have to be the wolf (that’s the flesh, the world and the devil’s job!). – just be the sheep. Together. As the Body of Christ, let’s be who we are meant to be…peaceful, harmless, social and intelligent sheep…that are dependent upon our Leader, the Good Shepherd…Jesus Christ. The One who laid his life down *for us.* The One who *stays with us*. The One who protects and blesses us. The One who brings us abundant life…and the One who is always with us!

***F.S.HS.***