

Acts 2: 42 – 47; 1Peter 2: 19 – 25; John 10: 1 – 11

‘Sheep in a vacancy!’

Introduction ...

One of the placements I had to do whilst training to be a vet was a fortnight on a sheep farm during lambing. 2 weeks is not long – but it was intensive and it has left an indelible understanding of how the life of the shepherd is affected by the behaviour of the sheep!

One of the regular tasks was to move the ewes with lambs that were a few days old from a field very close to the farm buildings to the next one further away. The sheep didn’t know me and my fellow vet student well at all – and most were not inclined to trust us.

The majority of both ewes and lambs were panic-ing that we were aiming to separate them – and so not willing to be herded quietly towards the gate that we needed them to go through. And a 2 or 3 day old lamb can run much faster than most vet students in wellies and on muddy ground ... you can, I’m sure, imagine the scene.

What a difference it made – towards the end of our 2 weeks when we’d been there at the lambing of most of the ewes we were moving ... and there was just a bit more trust.

Link to Bible readings ...

I could have chosen different Bible readings for today – my last FTW service – but I decided to stick with the set ones for today. However I do want to point out what the next verse of the Gospel reading is:

Jesus saying: **“I am the Good Shepherd”**

I think that is a strong and helpful reminder to us all ... I, as Rector, am leaving but the ‘main’ shepherd is not the human leader or leaders – but Jesus himself. Jesus will continue to lead, nurture, care for this benefice of FTW – its population and its congregations. There’s no need to scatter off in all directions ... there is a need to be together and to listen for and to the voice of Jesus.

How about those of you who will move into roles with greater leadership responsibilities? I hope that others will be as supportive and caring to you as so many have been to me. Thank you for all the care and prayer I have received ... please do continue to look after each other in this kind of way. In the Christian community, anyone in leadership occupies an odd kind of position – I am, you are, both sheep and shepherd or assistant shepherd. As a sheep – each of us is loved and cared for by **THE GOOD SHEPHERD** and needs to listen and respond to Jesus first and foremost – before attempting to lead others – and yet that role of leadership is so important too.

1 Peter 2: 19 – 25 ... Our other Bible readings can help too. The words from the first letter of Peter remind us of our own frailty – we do fall short, we do miss the mark, we do mess up, we do sin ... But through Jesus – there is forgiveness and freedom – so that we might **“live for righteousness.”** Righteousness includes the way in which we continue work for the well-being of our community – through looking after our neighbours, pastoral visiting, prayer, through the Foodbank, the visiting of Homes and Hospital, Time Together and so on.

Acts 2: 42 – 47 ... Righteousness also includes right relationships within and between congregations. Back to the behaviour of the Sheep and how it affects what the shepherd can achieve! **“See how these Christians love one another”** – was an

accolade given to the early church ... though it's also clear that they did not always agree on everything ... but love was paramount.

In a flock of sheep – or any group of animals or people – there are dominant characters ... How those dominant characters behave is so important. In a flock of sheep – a dominant one might manage to hog the best grazing ... or might look out for the young ewe with her first lamb. It's the same characteristic – but used to very different effect.

And so in Acts we heard that **“All who believed were together and had all thing in common ...”**

All thing in common – that's a big ask. Sharing out of resources and responsibilities. No-one was protective of their own position or possessions – whether physical or of knowledge or experience ... No-one was unwilling to lend a hand ... all things shared because of love and because of joint trust in the Good Shepherd.

Abundant life ... And one more related insight from **John 10**. Jesus saying: **“I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.”** This is linked to what we glimpsed in the Acts passage – where, having decided to have all things in common, we read that: **“they had glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people”** – a pretty good description of **abundant life**.

Back again to the behaviour of the sheep affecting the shepherd's work. Jesus' aim is abundant life for all. In a recent Course about living lovingly with difference, we thought about how our words, facial expressions and actions affect other people – and words might be texted, tweeted, *etc* or on Facebook or in a note or letter as well as being spoken. We can undermine someone, upset their day or we can affirm someone and make their day.

Conclusion ...

So a request or a challenge for the vacancy – depending which you respond to best ... in thinking of yourself as a sheep belonging to Jesus – will you seek to help Jesus as he seeks to guide and care for this Benefice ...

Will you work with Jesus, as your Good Shepherd:

- discerning his voice together – so that there isn't a scattering off in all different directions – as with the flock I talked about at the beginning
- recognising that we can all make mistakes – but also that we can be forgiven, reconciled and be set free to work for righteousness
- praying for the grace to love one another and to share resources, experience and responsibilities
- keeping an awareness that you are called to help one another have the abundant life that the Good Shepherd offers.

In those ways – the fellowship that we have continued to build and the ministry we have grown together over the last 11 years will go forward strongly – in the vacancy and beyond.

Thank you for all your commitment, dedication, love and support over those last 11 years – I will miss you greatly and will continue to pray for you. Please continue to pray for me – it will be a big change!

And one last Bible verse to point forwards – that I used in my last magazine letter and that the Junior Academy used in my last Collective Worship with them; it applies to us all, to each parish and to the FTW Benefice:

Jeremiah 29:11: **“For surely I know the plans that I have for you” says the Lord, “plans for your welfare and not for harm, plans to give you a future with hope.”**

Amen.