

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 22nd April 2018
Easter 4

We are the good shepherds – the Chair's address to the APCM 2018

Realising many of you won't be able to stop for the APCM after Mass today I thought, as a change from the normal programme, I would offer my Chair's response as today's sermon.

I want to begin my reflecting on being a shepherd. I wonder what your image of a shepherd is. My first image comes from the pages of my school bible. It's of a tall, handsome, lone figure, dressing in blue and white striped clothes of an Arabian man, blond hair flowing in the breeze with a small lamb in his arms. Your image might be more up to date, say the 'One man and his dog' type image or the quad bike riding shepherd sometimes seen on Countryfile. None of our images would have been in the mind of Jesus when he offered his parable we read today from John's gospel.

In Jesus' day and until relatively recently shepherding was far from a lonely occupation. Those caring for a flock of sheep travelled as family groups often. The sheep dog had not been invented and shepherding was a team effort. In Jesus' parable the shepherd in question would probably have been one of a family group – fathers, brothers, sons, uncles (yes, they probably would have been men) – and the level of commitment to the flock came from familial connection as well as shared interest and ownership. The shepherd came a cropper if they had no family to shepherd with them – maybe a man with a family of daughters – and they had to resort to hired hands.

If we take this leadership image of shepherding as a team effort we get a different understanding of leadership within the life of faith. It ceases to be the leadership of a lone figure but becomes a leadership pattern of sharing and working together. The good shepherd does know his sheep. It is the good shepherding team that knows their flock. Jesus takes this parable further to lead us, the reader, forward onto what is to come in the story of salvation, the death and resurrection of the saviour of the world. This shepherd lays down his life for his flock, for you and me. Not that we are then to become sheep, but we ourselves are freed and encouraged to become shepherds.

Leadership roles within our church are exercised in so many ways, often not seen as leadership of even ministry. Reading the APCM reports (and there are over 30 pages of it!) you will see what I mean. The leadership of the Flower team, the serving team, Pebbles and Junior Church, choir, Pilgrim, the Night Shelter etc. This alongside the work of the PCC, the committees we have formed this year and the Staff Team. There is much shepherding work, much leadership going on.

There are key lead shepherds, key leadership roles needed to guide and support the work of God (in our context) to allow the church to function and flourish. These roles we have for some reason not been able to fill: Churchwarden; PCC Secretary; Night Shelter Co-ordinator. There are others: flower arrangers, collection counters and junior church leaders. I've been tacking my brains and discussing with others why we are having such difficulty in filling these roles. We are busy people that is true. We are also very capable people. We are faithful people. More than capable to fulfilling these roles. Yet, when asking members to take up these lead shepherd roles the response is less than encouraging. I've never before had to beg a congregation to come up with officers...

Shepherds, whilst caring for their flock also must be good stewards of the resources available to them. In the little context that is food and water for those in their care. When the grass gets thin or the water supply dries up the shepherd moves their flock on to greener pastures and fresher springs. This image of stewardship helps us in our understanding of our care of this flock. We give of our time, talents and finances. Our Stewardship programme of 2017 was successful in encouraging members of St Peter's to share in practical as well as financial ways supporting the mission and ministry of St Peter's. However, our deficit tells us how far we have to go. The Finance Team have identified where the shortfall lay and what we will have to do to balance our books. I'll leave the detail to the Treasurer to report. But we do have to reflect on how we might be better stewards in our giving to St Peter's. we have no reserve. How can we play our part in ensuring the grass is greener and the water fresh that this flock may grow and prosper in the name of Jesus?

The shepherd must be looking forward always, seeing how they may prosper the wellbeing of those who depend on them. Not just the flock but the family and dependants. In church terms, how can we build up the mission and ministry of Jesus in our parish, encouraging those who are already members of the community to grow and deepen in their faith, developing their knowledge and relationship with God in prayer, learning and the reception of grace of God through the sacraments. Our Mission Action Plan asks us to develop our liturgy, to encourage our music, to make opportunities for outreach whilst encouraging our community to be inclusive and receptive to others as they are. We have been exploring possibilities in these fields. Some have worked, others we have found difficult and after trialling have now put aside for further reflection, all have been seeking ways to understand God's vision for our church community and our parish. The Mission Action Plan begins its next review process this year. We will continue to be challenged by it and to try to hear God's word for us.

So from this parable we have shepherd as part of a leadership team; shepherd as good steward, shepherd as visionary. There is much more to being a shepherd and much more to being a follower of Jesus. What do we do with this? First thing any Christian individual or community must do is pray. And I'd like to ask you to pray now for these issues that we have to face together: new church leaders in Churchwardens and Night Shelter co-ordinator and a PCC Secretary; a more positive response to our financial needs that will encourage our church to grow in mission; the time and space to hear God's word and vision for this parish and the community over the coming year or two.

- Shepherd as leader: Churchwarden; PCC Secretary; Night Shelter co-ordinator
- Shepherd as steward: creative and positive response to financial needs of St Peters
- Shepherd as Visionary: hearing the word and vision of God for our parish and responding creatively to it.