



GOSPEL GOSSIP

Jesus said, My sheep hear my voice

St John 10. 22-30

Sunday 11 May

Less is made of 'Good Shepherd' Sunday in the Common Lectionary, used by most of the mainstream churches, than previously. However, there is an abiding image in all of our minds of Jesus being the good shepherd – one who seeks out the lost sheep and restores it to the safety of the flock. In a recent poll of the 10 most popular songs used at funerals at crematoria, not a single one was a hymn. Yet not that long ago, 'The Lord's my Shepherd' would have been a strong contender along with 'Abide with me', 'All things bright and beautiful' and 'Morning has broken.'

It was the late Queen at her marriage who introduced the nation to this hymn version of Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want – meaning that we shall want for nothing with Jesus as our shepherd, not that we don't need him. Yet we cannot escape this image, even if we wanted to, and it's probable that we don't actually want to, as all of us need the reassurance of comfort and salvation, particularly if we find ourselves in a hostile place. Jesus knows his sheep, and they follow him, by and large, even if they wander off.

- Do you really believe that Jesus knows you and cares for you as an individual?
- Can you think of times when you have been 'found' and the feelings you underwent?
- How likely is that you have wandered – and what do you think that means?
- Are you more anxious to be a one-off or a member of a flock?
- Ultimately, is loneliness or isolation a positive or a negative?

Jesus defuses the Jews' burning question as to whether he was the Messiah, the long-promised Saviour, by turning the question back on his questioners, accusing them of not listening, and above all, of not believing. It is by belief that we can enjoy the benefits given us by Jesus, not because we are told that this is so. We have to believe that we are wealthy before we consider ourselves to be so. The trouble is we don't necessarily know what the benefits of faith are, nor do we fully appreciate them if we do. These 'benefits are summed up very simply by Jesus' words: I gave them eternal life, and they will never perish.

- Elsewhere St John tells us that Jesus gives us life, and life in its fullness. What does that mean for you?
- If belief brings benefit, what happens when your belief wavers, as it does for us all?
- When you wander off, how do you regain the right route?
- What does Jesus' voice 'sound' like'?
- Do you appreciate the presence of other members of the 'flock'?

In the 21st century, and in a largely urban environment, the image of Jesus as a Good Shepherd may not seem the most culturally relevant. Yet it is an image which is enduring, beyond being endearing. The fact that such an image is likely to be here to stay, and so much biblical imagery is related in some way to it as an analogy of God's love, forgiveness and salvation, we cannot dismiss it, but continue to draw on it to sustain and assist in our growth and well-being.