

“He bears us as his burden” - A sermon preached at St David’s, Exeter on 22nd April 2018
Easter 4

The symbol which most often identifies a church as a Christian building is the cross. We find crosses all over the world in many different forms, some with an image of the crucified Jesus, some plain, and some with an image of the resurrected high priest reminding us of Christ in glory seated at the right hand of God.

But the early Christians were rather wary of the image of the cross because it was associated with a humiliating public execution. One of the images of Christ that was preferred was that of the Good Shepherd, often depicted as a young, beardless man carrying a lamb on his shoulders. Anyone who has tried to explain the meaning of the cross to a class of primary school children we’ll have some sympathy with the choice of the Good Shepherd as a symbol of our faith!

The image of the Good Shepherd has both an immediate appeal and deep biblical roots. ‘The Lord is my shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing’. It is an image particularly associated with today’s gospel reading, ‘I am the good Shepherd. The good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.’ but it also reminds us of the parable of the lost sheep. So this image speaks of Jesus, and of God, who is with us, carrying us, seeking us out and even prepared to lay down his life for us. It is a beautiful, compassionate, supportive image, which brings comfort and reassurance. This was especially significant for the early Christians facing persecution, but it is no less relevant for us facing the stresses of stains of modern life, and holding to our faith in the face of apathy and indifference. And, returning to the 23rd psalm, it even carries the suggestion that the Jesus, the Good Shepherd is preparing an eternal home for us; ‘surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.’

Of course the cross also carries the implication that ‘Christ has borne our sins for us in his body on the tree’. But somehow the Good Shepherd image seems more approachable and comprehensible, even perhaps by those of us who aren’t that familiar with shepherding.

So the image of the Good Shepherd helps us to understand Jesus, and God as one who carries us. Psalm 68 puts it like this: ‘Blessed be the Lord who day by day bears us as his burden.’ But the image should also help us to understand ourselves, as Christians, and the church to which we belong. In his letter to the Galatians St Paul writes ‘Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.’ Galatians 6:2. This follows on from his teaching in the previous chapter that love should form the core of the Christian life. ‘for you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For

the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

The image of the good Shepherd is one which should inform and inspire our lives as Christian people. The modern ordination service begins the address to those to be ordained priests with these words, ‘Priests are called to be servants and shepherds among the people to whom they are sent.’ That’s very true, and very challenging! And on this vocations Sunday it is good to pray for people to come forward who will be prepared to test their calling to be priests. But that doesn’t mean that all baptized Christians are not also shepherds to those around them. We should all seek to ‘bear one another’s burdens’ and each of us will have different people’s burdens we try to share and bear; it may be a child or an elderly parent or a struggling colleague, neighbour or friend. If we are able to share or bear their burdens then we will be fulfilling the law of Christ.

At St David’s Church we have a wonderful group of pastoral visitors. We will be meeting again in a couple of weeks time to consider how we can best coordinate and take our work forward. Sometimes the role of church pastoral visitors is misunderstood. They are not doing the caring either instead of the clergy, or instead of the rest of us. It is only when we are all busy at our shepherding that the church will become the place of care and mutual support which God wishes it to be. But Church pastoral visitors are different because they have undertaken to receive training and authorization and to be accountable to the wider church for the care they offer. That is especially important in today’s climate when all organisations last be proactive in safeguarding the welfare of all those they come into contact with.

So, thank you to our pastoral visitors, those who show the face of the good Shepherd on behalf of David’s Church. And if you would like to be part of that ministry of visiting and care and are willing to receive training and DBS checking then please do have a word with one of the clergy or pastoral visitors.

During Eastertide in this country we can still usually see lambs out of the fields with their mothers. It is a beautiful sight and if you see them I hope it will remind you of the one who is our shepherd, our guardian, and our friend: one who seeks us out and bears us as his burden. May we know deeply for ourselves the love which the Good Shepherd has for us; and have grace to grow in his image and likeness.