

Address from Ash Leighton Plom, 25 April 2021

Good morning once again, and for those of you who don't know me, my name's Ash, curate here at St David's Church Exeter with St Michael's Mt Dinham.

In that reading from John's gospel, Christ gives us a parable of himself as the Good Shepherd of the sheep and foreshadows his own death and resurrection with the words that he has the authority to lay down his life and the authority to take it up again.

Not that long ago, the question of Jackie Weaver's authority in a parish council meeting on Zoom was the talk of the country, in fact the world, but how's this for authority: Jesus has the authority to take up his life again after having laid it down. Not even Jackie Weaver can do that.

So, we have in this scripture the familiar imagery of Christ as Good Shepherd, but we also have a prophecy from his own lips, of his death and resurrection. Jesus uses imagery from Old Testament scriptures like Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd", which represents God caring for his flock, and Isaiah 40 (v.11), which says God "tends his flock like a shepherd, gathering the lambs in his arms and carrying them close to his heart".

In doing so, Christ is asserting the Messianic claim that *he* is this Good Shepherd, as prophesied for example in Ezekiel 34 (v.23) where God says, "I will place over the people one shepherd, and he will tend them" or even Zechariah 13 (v.7) where God cries, "Awake, sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me! Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered", a prophecy of Christ's abandonment by his followers at his crucifixion, written five or six centuries before it happened.

The Psalmist, the Prophets, and Jesus use the analogy of a shepherd partly because it would have been familiar to the people they were speaking to. I wonder what a similar analogy might be today? We have with us some guests from Cornerstone Housing Association – so, maybe something like, "I am the good landlord, who works hard for their residents"? Bless you for all you're doing, Tom, and your whole team.

I invite you, friends, to consider afresh this week, in what ways are you being like Christ the Good Shepherd, giving of yourself to those around you? From family relationships, professional networks, neighbours and more, we all have God-given opportunities each week to imitate Christ's goodness in those places. This 'Good Shepherd' kind of self-giving can be costly, but be assured, we do so with his help, alongside him, by his Spirit, serving us as we serve others.

Close your eyes for a moment... see the care and love of the Good Shepherd, the provision he makes for his sheep. Imagine the way they hear his voice, perhaps as he speaks familiarly to them as they come into the fold. Feel the way they know him and trust him.

Contrast this with the way sheep flee from danger, this way they know to listen to their shepherd for their own safety. Picture a flock of sheep running in, responding to a call from their shepherd? In the parable we have the Good Shepherd contrasted with a wolf who attacks the flock. I wonder, how well do you know the voice of your Shepherd, and how good are you at fleeing to him, away from danger? You can always get to know him better by spending more time reading or listening to his Word, and having communion with him in the Sacrament we will share together shortly.

I'd be remiss if I didn't weave in the reading we had from Acts, too, hinging on that word Cornerstone, with our guests here today. In that reading, Saint Peter and Saint John were brought before the Jewish high council, condemned for preaching Christ crucified and raised from the dead, but instead of cowering at the threats and coercion from the authorities, these bold Christians seize the opportunity to share the good news again, even with their persecutors.

They face trial for preaching Christ's resurrection as though this were a crime, but Peter and John know rather that sharing Jesus with those who don't yet know him is in fact the best service we can offer God or people. Christians today are sometimes charged in a similar way – like sharing our faith is not allowed – but what if we reclaimed the faith Peter and John show, built on this knowledge that sharing our faith in Christ's resurrection is the greatest service we can offer.

Talking about Christianity with friends can be terrifying, and so Peter and John's confidence is all the more remarkable when we consider that the same people putting them on trial had crucified Jesus only a few weeks before, and the disciples had hidden themselves in a locked room after the crucifixion for fear of their own lives.

But now, after the resurrection, we see this awesome boldness in their speech.

Those who know that Christ is risen, who have been with him in Word and Sacrament, praying in his name, can conduct themselves even with Christ's authority, for Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples..." (Matthew 28.18-20) and "Behold, I give you the authority". (Luke 10.19)

So Peter preaches, "Let it be known to you, and to all the people, that this Jesus, whom you crucified, God has raised from the dead." He asserts the resurrection as the

strongest testimony for Jesus, and can't hold back on sharing this earth-shattering fact.

Even to this hostile audience, Peter knows we have authority to say: "come into the fold". To invite them to enter. And as Saint Peter makes clear, our salvation — our restoration to God's favour and blessing — is by what Christ has done, not by our own good deeds. Saint Paul says elsewhere, "all have sinned and fallen short... but the free gift from God is eternal life in Christ." (Romans 3.23, 6.23) What Christ has done for us, his death on the cross, his victory over sin and death, testified in power by his resurrection, this is why we call him Cornerstone. If you don't yet know Jesus as your Good Shepherd and your strong Cornerstone, come to him now, join the rest of us in the creed, the prayers, and sacraments of our forefathers and mothers.

If you're already a follower of Christ, a sheep of the Good Shepherd, can you pray about who you can share the good news of Jesus' resurrection with like Peter this week. It's not too late to invite someone to Thrive at 4pm today, with the bonus chance of them getting on Songs of Praise! And in the week ahead, you can invite them to church in person or online next Sunday.

Friends, you have authority from Christ. In fact, you're commissioned in it, to share our faith as the greatest service you can offer. I'll look forward to meeting your friends either this afternoon on Zoom, or perhaps next week in church or online. Maybe both.

Amen.