

## Lent Compline Talks 2017 Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington  
Lent 2, Sunday 12th March  
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### Shepherds

This Sunday I want to direct our thoughts on what occupations can teach us towards shepherds.

Last week we looked at gardeners, starting with Adam, the first human gardener. His son Cain was 'a tiller of the soil' – carried on his father's occupation – but Abel was a shepherd; a story reflecting the early domestication of animals. You'll remember story. Cain and Abel presented their gifts to the Lord. Cain's was not accepted; Abel's was accepted. Cain became jealous and killed Abel, which is where we get – 'Am I my brother's keeper'. Why, we may ask? It seems a bit 'mean' of God. I think that here we can jump right on to concept of Jesus as the 'Good Shepherd' tending a flock of living creatures – that was what God preferred.

Next time shepherds appear is when Joseph (of technical dreamcoat fame) was abandoned for dead by jealous brothers, but after being sold into slavery in Egypt had established himself as a chief steward and by his prudent management saved Egypt from 7 years of drought. But that same drought brought his brothers and his father to Egypt begging for entry because the pastures in Canaan were dried up. They came with their flocks and herds and Pharaoh (on Joseph's advice) allowed them to stay because they were expert herdsmen. Another example of the ability to care for other living creatures being seen as valued by God.

The next notable shepherd we come across in the old testament is David, who was to become King of Israel after Saul who had turned his back on the Lord. Samuel was told to go to Jesse because the Lord had chosen one of his sons to be king. All the seven elder brothers were presented, but rejected, and finally when the youngest, David, was called in from looking after the sheep, he was anointed by Samuel at which "The Spirit of the Lord came upon David. At that time, the Philistines were attacking Israel with their huge champion Goliath. David's brothers were in the army, and David was sent to take food to them. When Goliath challenged the army to provide a warrior to fight him 'they ran in fear'. David went to Saul and offered to fight Goliath, saying that as a shepherd he had fought and overcome lions and bears. Disdaining the offered sword David went with his slingshot and five smooth stones from the brook, felled Goliath by a blow to the forehead, and killed him.

Two lessons here: first that God may choose what seems the least likely among us as his champion, and second that, as shepherds have to be very brave, so too we may sometimes be called to be very brave in the service of the Lord.

But shepherds must also be very **caring**. Psalm 23 – 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, he makes me lie in green pastures' – all the good things. And in Isaiah, familiar from Handel's Messiah "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd and gently lead those that are with young". How does a shepherd 'feed' his flock? He does so by leading them to pastures where they can feed. There are many parallels here with our communion service where, week by week, we are 'fed' in many different ways, all symbolised by the bread and wine. We are not forced to attend, to partake it has to be a willing following of the leading of our good shepherd.

In the New Testament, shepherds appear first in the fields, watching their flocks by night. But when they received the message of Christ's birth they left their flock to find and see The Lord. So, too, we may be called to leave our worldly cares to find and experience our Lord.

Given all this, it is no surprise that John, in particular, has Jesus referring to himself as 'The Good Shepherd' and listing the characteristics of a good Shepherd. The good shepherd **knows his sheep by name**: we can't understand how, but in some wonderful way we can have a sense, through faith and in particular through prayer, that Jesus knows each one of us individually – perhaps better than we know ourselves. **His sheep know his voice**: This we can understand rather better. Each of us, as we grow in faith and prayer, can sense the voice of Jesus speaking to us in many ways. The good shepherd **searches for lost sheep**: In his earthly ministry Jesus was often particularly concerned for those who had lost their way – the tax-collector, the woman taken in adultery. Luke reports Jesus saying "those who are whole need not a physician, but those who are sick". We, as Jesus' physical hands on earth, have been handed the difficult task of trying to help those who may seem to be most resistant and most difficult. A hard challenge. When Jesus said "there are other sheep of mine, not of this fold, whom I must bring in" I think he referred to those outside of the Jewish faith – he once said to a Roman centurion 'I have not found so great faith in Israel'. Together, these two examples must make us, who have a sense of God's love in Jesus, witness that love others by acts of kindness, by the way we live, by the spoken word.

Finally, and as a prophesy of his own death, Jesus said 'the good shepherd **lays down his life** for his sheep'. Nowadays we often think of a shepherd as having a gentle pastoral life. In reality the life of a shepherd is pretty harsh and would have been even more so in the time of Jesus. Sheep-stealing would have been just as common as now and often the thief would have had no qualms of using violence; and there were always wild animals to contend with. Jesus did lay down his life for us, to reconcile sinful humanity to God. But we must remember that he rose again. Jesus is not a 'dead shepherd' but a living Lord and shepherd to all who are willing to be a part of his flock of believers.