

# The Parish of Bardsey with East Keswick

## Sermon

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### **Sunday 21 April 2024: Angela Hannafin**

Good morning and welcome to another Sofa sermon. Our gospel reading for today is from John and are the words of Jesus.

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<sup>11</sup> "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don't belong to him and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. <sup>13</sup> The hired hand runs away because he's working only for the money and doesn't really care about the sheep.

<sup>14</sup> "I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, <sup>15</sup> just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd.

<sup>17</sup> "The Father loves me because I sacrifice my life so I may take it back again. <sup>18</sup> No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again. For this is what my Father has commanded."

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To be honest, I've always found this scripture a bit difficult to understand. Jesus is using language that the ancient world would have understood – shepherds – but not that's not an occupation I know a lot about, or which has a lot of resonance with today. And why does Jesus call himself a 'good' shepherd? Is there such a thing as a bad shepherd? I don't have many shepherds to ask in my WhatsApp list of contacts. But let's dig together over the next few minutes.

This seems to be a scripture about the quality of relationship that Jesus offers, where he is described as a shepherd and the sheep are the Jews. He is a good shepherd. Good, because he has sacrificed his life for the sheep. The love that Jesus gives is best shown in the acts of Good Friday so in saying this, Jesus is pointing to his future death. In comparison to the hired hand, who abandons the sheep so that they are at risk of being attacked by wolves, Jesus the good shepherd will stay with his sheep and never leave them. I'm reminded of Peter who, under pressure, said he didn't know Jesus in order to

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save his own life. And isn't the flaky hired hand, who not only is scared of wolves, but is motivated by money, a bit like Judas? The hired hand clearly doesn't really care about the sheep. Jesus, in contrast, has a deep relationship with his sheep. He knows his sheep, and they know him. We are reminded that knowing Jesus is a two-way relationship. He knows us, and is waiting for us to know him. Just like the words in Psalm 139, Jesus knows all our ways and even what we're going to say before we say it. This relationship that Jesus offers extends beyond the Jews too. The other sheep that Jesus speaks of are the Gentiles, so we, the non-Jews, are also part of God's plan for salvation. I can't help be sad though when I read that there will be one flock with one shepherd. Jesus is looking forward to his church growing in time and is prophesying that there will be unity. He also prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that his disciples would be one, so it's clear that unity matters to God. We only have to look at world affairs, though, and see that very little of the unity that Jesus prayed for has been realised. We too must pray that prayer since it's clearly not been answered yet. Despite the current frightening events in Israel-Gaza and the widening Middle East, we must pray in faith for unity with the Good Shepherd.

Jesus is not an ordinary shepherd, or even, in the words of the advert, a Marks and Spencer shepherd. He is divine. This is one of the 'I am' saying that Jesus said in John's gospel, unique ways in which he showed he was God. Only someone holy could claim these seven things: to be the Bread of Life, the Resurrection and the Life, the Way the Truth and the Life, The Light of the World, The True Vine and the Good Shepherd. Like last week's gospel reading where we watched the disciples touch his scars, John wants to remind us that Jesus is the Risen Lord, who says he is able to lay his life down and take it back again. He has the authority as the Son of God to do this. To bypass the normal rules of biology in a way that's never been seen since. And the motivation for this is love. The Father loves Jesus because he does this. And the Father's love extends to us as Jesus lays down his life.

However, the more I think about the whole issue of shepherds, the more I am reminded of my own vocation. In the ordination service for priests, it is said that priests are to set the example of the Good Shepherd always before them as the pattern of their calling. It's not the True Vine or the Light of the World that's mentioned, but the Good Shepherd. So whatever Jesus says about himself in this passage is a model for priesthood. Priests therefore need to be compassionate and devoted, to know their people well and to be open with their congregations so that they can know them. It's a two-way street based on relationship. They need to be resilient and cope with the pressure, the unsociable hours and the loneliness the role can bring. And

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whilst the hired hand is motivated by money, well, clearly priests are not. We work hard and often too hard, but that's motivated by the love of God and the desire that many should know him. The ordination service says that priests are called to be servants and shepherds among the people to whom they are sent. We are called to look for the lost. That's why church can never be a holy huddle, or an in-club for those who are good enough or know the rules. Both those things don't apply. No one is good enough and there are no rules. We must be outwardly looking and inclusive. Which is why our Fundraising Campaign next week is not about asking people to join the church, although if they do we'll be delighted. It's about putting church at the heart of village life and asking those in the community to help us stay that way.

What can we do as a result of this passage? Without application all Bible reading is pointless. And we'll just be like the person in James who looks in the mirror and forgets what they look like. This is a reminder that we're all known by God, just as Jesus knows his sheep. And at the heart of any Christian community, is the offer of relationship where we can know God through Jesus. As we take the Eucharist today we can be thankful again for our Good Shepherd, who sacrificed his life for all sheep, as a sign of his faithfulness and love. The Good Shepherd is with us through all circumstances, and there is nothing that can separate us from his love. May our community reflect our gratitude to God, our devotion to him and his love which flows back through us to others.

AMEN.