

Easter 2 (HC) (2020)

A much-loved image of God in the Bible is the shepherd.

It is for this reason, the 23rd Psalm is often read out at funerals and memorial services.

Even if we don't know any real, live shepherds, somehow the mental picture of a man with a staff in his hand and a lamb over his shoulder brings peace and solace in times of need.

“The Lord is my shepherd.” Beautiful words, wonderful words, comforting words. Meditate on them. Draw strength from them.

But as you do, be aware that ‘shepherd’ has a deeper meaning. For you see, in the Bible, ‘shepherd’ is often used for *king*.

Take for example Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel, “I am the Good Shepherd”. To understand them fully, we need to go back and read Ezekiel 34.

When we do, we discover that the operative word here is “good.”

Allow me to flesh that thought out. Let me begin by saying that there is nothing warm and fuzzy in the message delivered by the Old Testament prophet. No lambs to sink your fingers into their wool in this passage.

On the contrary, his is a message of judgment.

“I am against the shepherds; and I will require my flock at their hand,” says God through him.

But, why is God angry?

Well, it is because those who have had oversight of God’s people – their kings -- have fed themselves and not the sheep.

Still goes on today, doesn’t it? Some (not all, I am happy to say) of our elected officials are more interested in feathering their own nest rather than in taking care of their people. Without a doubt some are using the present crisis for personal gain.

What might God's message be these 'shepherds' of our day? Well, I shall let you figure that one out.

In any event, Ezekiel 34 – the shepherd chapter – does not end with words of judgment, but with words of hope. The good news is that God Himself is coming to be the shepherd of His people.

He will be everything those former shepherds have not been. He will be the saviour of His people. If these they have been bad, He will be good.

Put this thought up against Jesus' words in today's Gospel where He says, "I am the Good Shepherd" and what do you discover?

Jesus is that good King, and, more than that, He is God.

He puts a human face on that Shepherd spoken of in the 23rd Psalm . . . the Shepherd who provides for the needs of His people . . . the Shepherd who stays with His people through thick and thin (yes, even through the valley of the shadow of death).

Let's take that thought down from the sky and see how it might intersect with where we are in this year of grace and sorrow 2020.

When put all the pieces of the puzzle together, what do we discover? This I would suggest:

This Shepherd knows your name.

He knows your needs and fears.

He cares and is with you when no one else is.

This past week I was very moved by a video I saw. It was of a man in Northern Ireland who had recently recovered from the coronavirus. His story went like this:

After being taken ill, he had been carried to a local hospital. In that facility (as in this country at this present time) no one, not even a family member or clergyman, was allowed in.

In this sterile sepulchre, he seesawed between life and death.

At one point, he said he became overwhelmed by the thought he was all alone and began to cry out: “God, send me someone.”

Before long there came a knock at his door. It was a room cleaner. Remaining in the doorway, the young man asked how was doing.

When he learned he was in distress, he asked if he could pray with him.

The ill man readily agreed, and the room cleaner began to ask the Lord, to restore the man’s weakened lungs, to give him peace and to remain with him. ///

God heard this man’s cry for help and sent a room cleaner. This room cleaner, as it turned out, was not only a Christian believer but a former missionary.

From that point on, the man said he began to regain his strength, but more than that he no longer felt alone.

That day, in that locked-down hospital, those words found in the 23rd Psalm -- **Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me** – became real in this man’s life.

Before I close, I want to offer this thought. The Good Shepherd needs many ‘room cleaners’.

Right now, there are many out there who feel isolated and alone. Fear is gripping their heart. Cries for help are going up all round us.

Just the past week, a heart-wrenching message was left on the church’s telephone. It was from a 75-year-old woman who lives alone in one of those cabins in the woods.

She said she was sick and would shortly be going to hospital. Saddest of all, she said she would probably not be coming out. This was it.

As soon as I got the message, I called her back and was very relieved when she answered the telephone. As it turned out, she had changed her mind about going to hospital.

As I listened to her, it became apparent what she needed most was not clinical care, but a ‘room cleaner’ . . . someone to look in on her . . . a presence, God’s presence.

The Shepherd of Love still seeks His sheep, and He often does so by sending people like you and me.

Many cries for help are going up at this time.

I call upon you this morning first to Believe the Gospel of the Good Shepherd. Learn to say with all your heart, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Claim the promise, the hope and above all the Person found in these words.

But also resolve to be the Gospel of the Good Shepherd. Resolve to be a ‘room cleaner’ for Jesus – nothing more, nothing less.