

Parish of Esher
Christ Church, Esher with St George's, West End

SERMON

Seventh Sunday of Easter, 2 June 2019
9.00am Sung Communion, St George's, West End
Acts 16.25-34; Psalm 97; John 17.20-end

Ven. David Gerrard

In the Name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Ezekiel 34.11 The Sovereign Lord says; 'I will search for my sheep and look after them. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays.'

John 10.7 Jesus said 'I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'

Last Friday I went to the Annual General Meeting of Southwark Cathedral Council of canons. What an exciting life I lead. The Dean spoke movingly about the terrorist attacks last year in famous food tourist attraction, Borough Market which abuts the Cathedral. We heard about the shock, the horror of so many people. The one good thing that came after the murders and stabbings of entirely innocent people was that it drew the market Stall holders, restaurateurs, and shopkeepers closer to each other and to the local community including the cathedral.

One result of this was that the bakers from the bread shops came to the cathedral last autumn to celebrate Lammas Day, or Loaf Mass Day when the first loaves baked with the newly harvested corn are brought to be blessed. This was so vital a part of the healing process that a local shopkeeper who kept a very smart tea shop in Borough market and also owns a tea plantation in Darjeeling asked if he could bring the first of the tea leaves picked for the tea harvest. The Dean hunted through the scriptures but could find nothing about hot drinks in the Bible so decided he would bless the tea in any case. Which he did in a special service. So on Friday evening Mr. Ratan Mondal came to the Canons' Dinner, and we all departed at the

end of the meal with the first blush of Darjeeling Tea leaves in packets with advice as to how to brew it. Boiling water over the tea leaves. No milk. No sugar, but you can reuse the tea leaves twice more and in the later brews there is no caffeine.

This jogged my mind as a couple of weeks ago Jen and I went to our parish church in Yorkshire. St. Andrew Grinton is a lovely Norman church slightly spoiled by modern additions such as the pulpit with its date of origin painted on its canopy, 1714. That is some six hundred years after the church was built. It is sometimes called "The cathedral of the Dales" and is the parish church of Swaledale that stretches from Grinton some 22 miles to the head of the dale. There are four other village churches in the parish of Swaledale and Arkengarthdale, and the five churches are all looked after by the young woman rector who has no assistant clergy or lay readers or occasional preachers to help her.

This year she held a new service called "A Service of Thanksgiving for the Harvest of Lambs." When the new born lambs were blessed. As well as the usual congregation and visitors there were about a dozen sheep farmers in the church. The local sheep are Swaledales, easily distinguishable by their black faces and black kneecaps, and the lambs are especially adorable in appearance. Four of them were present in a small pen just outside the church. They were all pet lambs having been hand fed as their mothers had been unable to feed them. The service began with the hymn

"Loving shepherd of thy sheep,
Keep thy lamb, in safety keep;
Nothing can thy power withstand,
None can pluck me from thy hand."

Other hymns during the worship were

"The King of love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never,
I nothing lack if I am his
And he is mine forever."

And another hymn with the verse,

“I was lost but Jesus found me,
Found the sheep that went astray,
Threw his loving arms around me,
Drew me back into his way.”

The confession began, “Eternal God, our Guide and Shepherd, we have strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.” The two readings were appropriate and I included a verse from each as my texts at the beginning of this sermon. The first reading was from the prophet Ezekiel telling about searching for the lost sheep and bringing them back to graze on the mountain heights of Israel. The second reading was from John’s Gospel about how Jesus was not a thief or a robber or a wolf like those to kill and destroy the sheep, but the Good Shepherd who will guide them into the sheep pen, who will protect them. His sheep know him as he knows them, and he will bring together his own flock, and other sheep who will listen to his voice so there will be one flock and one shepherd.

The intercessions carried on the theme as we thanked God for the sheep and lambs in the lambing season, for the hard work of the shepherds and their families, for the beauty of the hills and valleys, for the pastures and the water from streams and rivers, for the ewes, with their own wisdom, for their strength and care as mothers, for the miracle of the birth of the baby lambs. Near the end of the service we all went outside and the young lambs were blessed. “Father bless the lambs. Jesus bless the lambs. Spirit bless the lambs”. And we then blessed the ewes, the tups, the farmers, the lambs, and asked God to bless our own lives. The service ended with the blessing of God, that great shepherd of the sheep.

It was a lovely service and had a message for all of us urbanites. It was a reminder of how fortunate we are in our comfortable lives, how much we owe to farmers and shepherds. More profoundly it reminded us of the nature of God, a loving God who cares for us as shepherds care for their flocks. A God not of fierce justice nor harsh doctrines nor stern justice but of love and sacrifice and forgiveness and care who loves and seeks for the lost and lonely and injured and hurt, and that includes all of us.

It helps us in this vacancy to remember how hard clergy have to work in other parishes with many churches to care for them with small numbers in remote villages having to support several lovely old churches in each parish, all without our resources of people and wealth. It reminds us that among all other virtues and abilities that we long for in our next rector, we want her, or even possibly him, to be a loving and faithful shepherd who cares for their flock more than caring for their own comfort or desires.

Swaledale Sheep are renowned for their hardiness. They can survive the harshest of winters, surviving for six or seven weeks while trapped under snowdrifts, gnawing the grass or each other's wool. New shepherds who mean to be kind sometimes bring them into the warmth of their homes yet the warmth and comfort are often fatal to them and they die. So too we need to learn to be strengthened by adversity and harshness while we can be destroyed by ease and comfort and luxury.

The rector preached very well on these themes and had a lovely quotation about how our lives should be lived. "Live each day as if it is your last. Farm every day as if you will live for ever." She noted the relevance of this to a recent saying by Pope Francis when he said that when we died what was important was not the wealth we left behind but the heritage, the legacies for which people will remember us.

So the blessings of the lambs, and of the bread, and of the tea reminds us of our need to remember the goodness and annual renewal in God's creation, while the tragedy in Borough Market reminds us that we must not only live each day as if it is our last but also to work and serve as if we will live for ever as we try to leave behind our heritage and legacy of love and care and service.

May we follow the example of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ our only Saviour.

Amen.