

Easter 4 - John 10.1-10

Many of you will know that one of the ways I've been keeping myself fit during the lockdown has been to go running around my local area. With the beautiful weather we've been having lately, I've almost started to look forward to running days when I can make a nice, big loop through the villages around here and enjoy the scenery of the Norfolk countryside...which goes a long way towards taking my mind off of the agony of putting one foot in front of the other (I'm not much of a runner). And one of my favourite sights right now is to see pastures full of sheep, especially the lambs jumping around and head-butting their mums. If you're not a shepherd, it's a sight that's almost guaranteed to make you smile. I imagine for the shepherd, there are things to worry about and maybe the sheep can get pretty annoying to deal with, but at least for passers-by it's a lovely scene to look at.

So, I was walking home at the end of my run the other day, and I passed one of these pastures full of sheep, and I lingered for a minute because I was thinking about this morning's Gospel reading and what I might have to say about it. It's a pretty familiar passage, and for most of us pretty comforting, too. Jesus describing himself as the Good Shepherd and us as his sheep probably makes us think of Psalm 23 and conjures up peaceful images of green pastures and still waters. That was certainly the kind of picture that was in front of me as I leaned on a fence post and considered these sheep. But the part of the reading that was going through my mind was the last verse, John 10.10:

'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

So I started thinking about the day-to-day life of sheep, as it was being played out in front of me. From my perspective, it didn't seem all that exciting. Lots of time spent concentrating on the best bits of green to nibble. Occasionally moving to another spot and then doing some more nibbling. Lying down for a rest when the nibbling all got to be a bit much. Even the energetic exuberance of the lambs was limited to short bursts of leaping and running before settling back down to nibbling next to their mums. In human terms, this wouldn't seem like a very exciting life...in fact, I think for most of us it would very quickly become mind-numbingly boring. But for sheep, this was probably about the best life they could imagine. No worries about predators, plenty of food readily

available, mild weather...it doesn't get much better. From their point of view, this isn't just living, this is living abundantly.

And Jesus said his whole purpose was not just so that we can live, but so that we can live abundantly. But what exactly does that mean? What is 'abundance' in life, not for sheep but for human beings? Does it mean having a lot of things, accumulating stuff in abundance? Doubtful, since Jesus himself didn't seem particularly interested in doing so. Maybe it's getting out there, having lots of adventures, travelling the world and living by the motto *Carpe Diem*. Well, I'd be the first to say that, if we are able, getting outside of ourselves and trying new things and meeting new people isn't really a bad thing, but where does that leave those who are less able to do so...those who are restricted by physical or economic or social circumstances...does that mean their life can't possibly be as full as that of the globe-trotter? Maybe abundance in life is about not wasting a single minute...filling up our days with business and productivity, achieving as much as we possibly can in our limited time here. More often than not, I think that feels more like crushing stress than it does abundance.

So what is Jesus talking about when he talks about 'abundance' of life? Well, clearly the whole analogy of the shepherd and his sheep is telling us that it has something to do with staying close to him and following where he leads. And there's something, too, about what voices we listen to. The better we get to know Jesus, the easier it is to recognise his voice and figure out what he's telling us. But that can be really hard sometimes, especially when there are lots of other voices giving their own opinions of who we should be or what we should be doing. So Jesus makes a distinction to help us sort it out: *the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy*. The destructive voice, the one that steals away our time and our joy and our very selves, is the one we have to be alert to...that's the thief that will take away what God is trying to give us.

So how do we recognise that voice? I think we've all heard the saying that no one on his death bed has ever said, 'I wish I'd spent more time at work.' When it comes down to it, we can all identify what truly matters in our own lives, and that usually centres on relationships and nurturing the talents God has given us. Abundance in life is going to look different for each one of us because relationships and talents are different for each one of us, so first we have to identify these important aspects of our own lives. The destructive voice will then be the one that tries to steal and kill and destroy: stealing our time, strangling our feeling of worth, damaging our relationships. And it can be oh so subtle - hard work can so easily tip over into overworking, self care can so easily tip over into selfishness, self-sacrifice can so easily tip over into self-annihilation. It's a lifetime's

work to get good at recognising the distinctions, and we're all going to be led astray every once in awhile by the siren song of what we think is a good cause.

But think about what life is like when we focus instead on what actually matters - when we spend real quality time on strengthening our relationships, or put our efforts into our own particular vocation, or even when we deliberately stop our business and intentionally take a proper day of rest. That feeling of fulfilment, of being in the right place at the right time, of truly being ourselves...that's when we see what it is to be more than just living. That's when we're discovering life in abundance. And the key to living that way is learning to listen to the voice of the shepherd. By spending time with God, by listening to God in prayer and Scripture, we get better at seeing things from God's perspective. Our own focus can be so narrow and blinkered, or so distracted that everything is completely out of focus, but God always has a better view and is always ready to take our hand and guide us.

And, as I talked about last week, we've got such a good opportunity right now to think about all of this. Life has changed so dramatically in the last few weeks that it has forced most of us to stop and take stock. If we'd never taken the time before to think about what's important in our lives, this sudden disruption has probably shaken some of those thoughts loose. I got a follow-up call the other day from a Navy chaplain, and he said the number of enquiries about chaplaincy, which are normally pretty low and sporadic, has suddenly shot up since the beginning of lockdown. People are reevaluating their lives and vocations, families are suddenly recognising how little time they spent together before. I've found myself making contact with friends I haven't talked to in years. Neighbours who were complete strangers before are shopping for each other and putting up encouraging messages in windows. Isn't it amazing that it took an unprecedented restriction on our public life to see such a growth in truly living? Jesus came to so that we may have life *abundantly*...perhaps right now in the midst of what seems like life-limiting circumstances many of us are finally recognising what that abundant life really is.