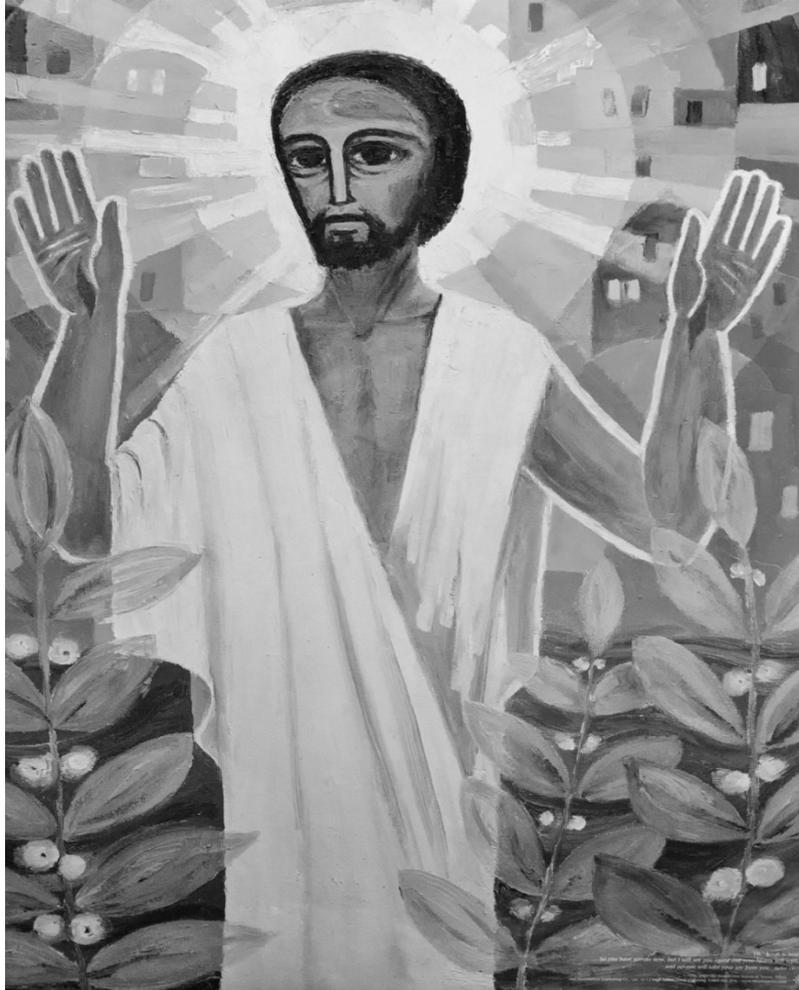


**Sunday, 25 April 2021**  
**The Fourth Sunday of Easter**  
**Please use this material with**  
**the Easter order of Service**



**Collects**

Almighty God,  
whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life:  
raise us, who trust in him,  
from the death of sin to the life of righteousness,  
that we may seek those things which are above,  
where he reigns with you  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

*(or)*

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Risen Christ,  
faithful shepherd of your Father's sheep:  
teach us to hear your voice  
and to follow your command,  
that all your people may be gathered into one flock,  
to the glory of God the Father. **Amen.**

**Readings**

**Acts 4: 5-12**

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is "the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone."

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.'

**John 10: 11-18**

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them

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also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

#### **Sermon**

John's Gospel is one of the world's great architectural glories. Its construction constantly amazes us with its lofty words, grand vision, intricate detail, vividness and sense of presence. In some ways, as in today's reading, the powerful images are direct and everyday – Jesus is a good shepherd, a door, a vine, bread, way or road. Like all great architecture the immediate impact is holistic and powerful, we don't see detail so much but experience the general view. The genius of John's Gospel is that as we become aware and more familiar with it, we realise that John has constructed something of extraordinary complexity, which even a life's time study cannot fully appreciate; for the more we think we understand it, the more we realise that there is more to be studied.

Everyone has their favourite way of describing John's Gospel. The actor Sir David Suchet – famous for playing Agatha Christie's Poirot on television, in an interview in last week's Church Times compared John's Gospel not to architecture but to J.S. Bach's music:

John's Gospel is Bach. It's all counterpoint, you've got the top line, but you've got other meanings and references that just go down, down, down, down, down, down, down' (Church Times 16 April 2021).

It was reading John's Gospel, in a hotel copy of the Bible in 1986 which Suchet says brought about his conversion to Christianity:

When I got to the very end I thought: this is it – this is my message that I've devoted my life to since then.

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So, let us with Suchet go 'down, down, down, down, down, down, down' into the depths of today's Gospel passage.

Let's begin with first impressions or the top line as it were. Some of you may have attended the excellent Space for the Spirit a couple of weeks' ago presented by Molly Warrington and her team. The theme was sheep. From their presentation we learnt that sheep is one of the most widely used and powerful metaphors in the Bible as an image of God as shepherd and sheep as his people. Psalm 23 most beautifully evokes this relationship 'The Lord is my shepherd ... he makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters'. So, Jesus tells the Pharisees, that unlike them who are hired hands and have no real concern for the people, he is the good or real shepherd because he has not abandoned his flock.

To understand this more and to see what has prompted Jesus to say that he is the Good Shepherd we need to go down a level by turning back to the previous chapter in John's Gospel. Here we read that near the pool of Siloam Jesus had cured a young man who had been blind since birth. But the Pharisees were furious not only because the healing indicated that Jesus was the messiah but because he had broken the Sabbath no-work laws. It is this which really annoyed and angered them.

Then comes the key moment. The so-called guardians of Israel who should have been shepherds to the people were so incensed by the man's trust in Jesus that 'they drove him out' (9:34). In effect they excommunicated him from the community and worship in the synagogue.

So, this takes us to the next level of meaning. Behind Jesus' simple idea of being a good shepherd is the prophet Ezekiel's strongly worded attack on the leaders of Israel back in the time of exile in 586 BC. In Ezekiel's prophecy the leaders of Israel are the false shepherds who

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have led the people, their sheep astray. As God says via Ezekiel, 'you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed ... but with force and harshness you have ruled them' (Ezekiel 34:4). The model of the good shepherd is God and they, the leaders, fall woefully short.

There is yet another level for us to descend. At this deeper level, the conflict reflects the experiences of the very early Christians and those who attacked them because of their faith – Jews, Romans. These people are like the wolf Jesus refers to, who 'snatches them and scatters them'. But some commentators also think the wolves refer to so-called Christian leaders who have misused their power for personal gain and gratification only then to abandon the flock, their congregation, scarred and bereft. We are only too acutely aware of such appalling cases today.

But there is yet another deeper issue which the Gospel raises, and that is the very easy way in which we can 'other' people. 'Othering' is what happened to the blind young man when the Pharisees ceased to see him as a person but rather as a problem to be got rid of, a nuisance to be cast out of the fold. By contrast it was Jesus as the good shepherd who actively sought him out and brought him back into the fold of love and compassion. Note: inclusiveness is not a trendy 21st idea, its roots are at the very heart of Jesus' ministry!

This is what Jesus, the Good Shepherd, said:

'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also ... so there will be one flock, one shepherd.' (John 10: 16)

All forms of racism, sexism, classism, ageism are examples of othering. We also 'other' people in the church when we talk about 'the liberals', 'the evangelicals', 'the Catholics' and so on. It is so easy to do, but if we are to follow the model of the Good Shepherd we know that to do so means sacrificing our preferences and overcoming our prejudices to

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see all people as members of the Kingdom, 'one flock' within the church of God.

So, perhaps we can see why David Suchet and millions like him have found in the architecture of John's Gospel the depths of meaning and truth to bring them to and sustain them in faith. But of course without Christ, the Good Shepherd, John would not have written his Gospel in the first place. Thanks be to God.

Michael Wilcockson

1 Father, hear the prayer we offer:  
not for ease that prayer shall be,  
but for strength that we may ever  
live our lives courageously.

2 Not for ever in green pastures  
do we ask our way to be;  
but the steep and rugged pathway  
may we tread rejoicingly.

3 Not for ever by still waters  
would we idly rest and stay;  
but would smite the living fountains  
from the rocks along our way.

4 Be our strength in hours of weakness,  
in our wand'rings be our guide;  
through endeavour, failure, danger,  
Father, be thou at our side.

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1 The King of love my Shepherd is  
Whose goodness faileth never  
I nothing lack if I am His  
And He is mine forever.

2 Where streams of living water flow  
My ransomed soul He leadeth  
And where the verdant pastures grow  
With food celestial feedeth.

3 Perverse and foolish oft I strayed  
But yet in love He sought me  
And on His shoulder gently laid  
And home rejoicing brought me.

4 In death's dark vale I fear no ill  
With Thee dear Lord beside me  
Thy rod and staff my comfort still  
Thy cross before to guide me.

5 Thou spread'st a table in my sight  
Thy unction grace bestoweth  
And O what transport of delight  
From Thy pure chalice floweth.

6 And so through all the length of days  
Thy goodness faileth never  
Good Shepherd may I sing Thy praise  
Within Thy house forever.

CCLI Song # 40681 Henry Williams Baker | John Bacchus Dykes

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1 Forth in the peace of Christ we go;  
Christ to the world with joy we bring;  
Christ in our minds, Christ on our lips,  
Christ in our hearts, the world's true King.

2 King of our hearts, Christ makes us kings;  
Kingship with him his servants gain;  
with Christ, the Servant-Lord of all,  
Christ's world we serve to share Christ's reign.

3 Priests of the world, Christ sends us forth,  
this world of time to consecrate,  
our world of sin by grace to heal,  
Christ's world in Christ to re-create.

4 Prophets of Christ, we hear his Word:  
he claims our minds to search his ways;  
he claims our lips to speak his truth;  
he claims our hearts to sing his praise.

5 We are his Church, he makes us one:  
here is one hearth for all to find;  
here is one flock, one Shepherd-King;  
here is one faith, one heart, one mind.

Text: LM; James Quinn, SJ, (1919–2010)

Music: 15<sup>th</sup> century English melody arr. Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

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### Closing Prayer

Merciful Father,  
you gave your Son Jesus Christ to be the good shepherd,  
and in his love for us to lay down his life and rise again:  
keep us always under his protection,  
and give us grace to follow in his steps;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**