

## Virginia's Sermon for Sunday 3 May 2020

My only experience of shepherding occurred when I was a teacher and was required to go on school trips; a task I dreaded and feared and would do almost anything to get out of even if it meant attempting to teach those left behind at school subjects of which I had only the most rudimentary knowledge! The entire day was spent in feverish counting and checking and re-checking of names on our carefully prepared and increasingly crumpled lists to ensure that all our 'little dears' were still present and correct. It was utterly exhausting and far more akin to herding cats than sheep. The 'little dears' were naturally blissfully unaware of the inner state of anxiety of their shepherds whom I suspect that they perceived as a considerable hindrance to their freedom to fully enjoy the day and to make matters worse they had absolutely no concept of time!

My worst ever experience happened when we took a group of children to the theatre in London and as we left one boy took it into his head not to follow the 'flock' but exit by an entirely different door. We became immediately aware of the discrepancy in numbers as we began the counting on the pavement outside. Panic! We didn't exactly abandon the 'ninety- nine' but left the most imposing, most feared, authoritarian teacher with them, not me I hasten to add, while the rest of the staff scattered to find our little lost sheep. Fortunately, he had not wandered far and indeed appeared quite unfazed by being alone on a crowded London street while our blood pressures and heart rates slowly returned to normal.

Reflecting on all this I wonder if just sometimes our Good Shepherd despairs of the task He has taken upon Himself to lead and guide us through our lives. At a time like this when we are living through a global pandemic does He ever wonder why at times instead of trusting implicitly in His leadership we allow ourselves to be robbed by thieves and bandits. Jesus himself clearly warned this could so easily happen when he spoke the words *'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.'* Do we find ourselves robbed of our confidence that He will always be with us and lead us even in the darkest of valleys? Robbed of our hope that in time we will find ourselves once again pastured by still waters? Robbed of our belief that, come what may, we shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever? By allowing ourselves to be stripped of such sure confidence, such implicit trust, such eternal hope we find that we really are in that darkest valley without a sure guide but in His place a plethora of guides all shouting different and confused instructions so that we feel completely lost and abandoned not having an idea of where we should go next. Instead of still waters we find ourselves facing turbulent waters of doubt, mistrust and hopelessness generated by an outpouring of conflicting and frequently fake news, rumours and advice. Instead of that comforting knowledge that we are at home in Christ we find ourselves like that small boy alone and surrounded by the unknown and the unfamiliar not knowing where we can find safety and have our sense of peaceful security restored

These are not easy times and in the history of humankind I doubt if there has ever been anything to remotely resemble the situation we find ourselves in, but, even if there is nothing with which to compare it, nonetheless we have and always will have that promise of the Lord who is our Good Shepherd that he will call us by name and lead us out and take us to new pasture where we may find a new life, an abundant life. The words of the

gospel are emphatic: 'I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and to kill. I come that they may have life and may have it abundantly.' We cannot know or I think even begin to guess what the future holds for us but of one thing I am certain it **will** have God in it. God who cares for each one of us His children. God who in the person of Christ is our Shepherd who knows and recognises each of us and will go looking for us when we take the wrong way, the wrong gate and find ourselves lost and helpless. This faith has been the bedrock for countless millions of God's children in times of plagues, wars, and persecution. This faith is our bedrock today, tomorrow and all the days that lie ahead; we must not allow thieves and bandits to rob us of it and thus to destroy all that is truly of lasting value in our lives which is our unshakeable faith in God's mercy and love for us at all times, in all places.

I will end with these beautiful words by Catherine of Siena: 'You have loved me even before I existed, and knowing this, I can place my trust in your love and set aside every fear.'

I pray we will all know and recognise the truth of these words today and every day of our life's journey being led by Christ our sure and constant Shepherd.

*Do not fear what may happen tomorrow. The same loving Father who cares for you today, will care for you tomorrow and every day. Either He will shield you from suffering or He will give you unfailing strength to bear it. Be at peace then and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginings.* St Francis de Sales