

A Easter 4

7th May 17

Place: St Mary's am

1.Peter 2.19-25

Theme: Leadership

John 10.1-10

- ◆ I want to talk about leadership this morning as we run up to a general election. Our Gospel this morning is not so much about how to look after sheep as it is about leadership and legitimacy.
- ◆ As a nation, all of us are thinking about who we want our leader to be and who would best represent our constituencies in Parliament. In the Parish of Wimbledon, you did a lot of thinking about leadership during the interregnum and we are all thinking about it and what shape it will take as I grow into the role of Rector.
- ◆ We all want to be lead, we all want to know what the right way to go is, to be cared for and protected, we all want our needs to be met. We all also want to have power, to take control, to be independent, to lead. If you watch a group of toddlers you can see the tension between these two desires as little children take their first wobbly steps on their own and then rush back to mum or dad at the first sign of danger. Through our lives the balance between these two desires changes, as one grows the other diminishes, but they are always still there.
- ◆ When Jesus talks about shepherding and the Good Shepherd in the New Testament we should not be wondering about sheep husbandry in New Testament Israel to understand what he is saying.

When Jesus talks about shepherds he is continuing a long Old Testament tradition of using shepherds as a metaphor for the political and religious leaders of Israel. John wants us to understand that when Jesus is talking about shepherds, he is talking about the leaders of Israel, so the passage starts ‘Jesus said the Pharisees.’

- ◆ In our Gospel reading Jesus is implying that the Pharisees are the thieves and bandits and he is the only legitimate leader; he is the Son of God. God is the Gatekeeper and he has entered by the gate through his incarnation.
- ◆ We don't notice how startling and provocative what Jesus is saying is because we are focussed on sheep and shepherds. Jesus says that everyone who came before him were thieves and bandits. They were not legitimate leaders. They came only to steal, kill and destroy.
- ◆ One of the inheritances of the industrial revolution and the romantic movement in this country is we have a rather sentimental understanding of what shepherds do. The reality of being a shepherd is and has always been that shepherds keep sheep to kill and eat them and harvest their wool. All shepherds are thieves and bandits from the sheep's point of view because they all seek to kill and exploit the sheep.
- ◆ Jesus is the only Good Shepherd because he is the only one who comes not to kill the sheep but

to die for them. Jesus is the only legitimate leader for God's people because he comes from God. His is different from every other leader because rather than bringing death, he comes to bring abundant life to his people. In other words, Christ leads us to his kingdom not through domination and violence, but through his death on the cross and resurrection. He brings us through the cross to the new creation of his Kingdom.

- ◆ What does that mean for us as we think about what leaders to elect? What does it mean for us as leaders and followers in our lives, families and communities?
- ◆ Well first it is a reminder to us that we are all sinners. No leader is perfect, no human being can save us, no matter how gifted. The psalmist puts it very succinctly 'Put not your trust in Princes, nor in any human power, for there is no help in them.' Ps146.2
- ◆ As Christians we have the joy and freedom of knowing Christ and it is in Christ that we should put our trust. He is the Good Shepherd. It is he that will lead us to abundant living, not the promises of any politician.
- ◆ So does that mean we should not vote, should not participate in the political system? By no means. History teaches that some leaders are better than others, and that while even the best political leadership cannot save us, good

leadership can definitely make life better for us now and bad leadership can make it worse.

However, the power of even the most powerful is limited and no one gets it right all the time. No one has a perfect view or a perfect understanding.

- ◆ Every leader is fallible because every leader is human. All human leaders ultimately let us down, grow old and weak and are liable to folly. All human leaders die.
- ◆ When we are called to exercise leadership ourselves, we should not shirk it, but do so remembering our limitations and always as followers of Christ; not simply doing things as they seem best to us. We should not lead simply to satisfy our wants and desires. As leaders we need to be humble and follow Christ's example, seeking to serve rather than to be served. Peter's words in our epistle are also salient here. When we are faced with injustice or violence we need to follow Christ's example, not seeking revenge and responding with violence but trusting in God's power to redeem. I think Christians often read this as demanding that we become like doormats, simply accepting abuse. But Peter says when we face injustice we should entrust ourselves to God, who judges justly. Justice should and will prevail, but it is for God to enact saving Justice not us. In other words, we need to do what we can but recognise that we cannot

save. As leaders and followers we need to learn to let humans be human and let God be God. Many of the gravest sins and most horrific atrocities human leaders have committed have come when they have tried to act like gods.