

Meditation for Easter 4



Today we are invited to welcome the Risen Christ into our lives as the Good Shepherd.

This is a theme that brings great challenge and also great comfort...

Great challenge

The Good Shepherd passage in John 10 contains a big challenge. I think the most important word in it is, in Greek, *ek* – out

The good shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them *out*.
When he has brought *out* all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

Out of where?

The picture is one of the sheep safely gathered and congregated in a cosy sheepfold. They feel safe and secure there. They are protected by a fence. But the Shepherd wants to lead the sheep **OUT** of the sheepfold and into the place of vulnerability – out into the open hills. He wants to lead them from confinement to adventure, from safety to risk...

This image also resonates with us at this time when we cry 'lead us OUT!' When we crave to be released from our prisons to taste freedom once again. Enough of the sheepfold!

But at a deeper level it becomes a picture of what is happening to the Church.

The Lord wants to lead us as a Church out from the safety of the sheepfold, out from the security of the enclosure, which represents our 'comfort zone' and stands for the way we have always done things, our routines and self-preserving traditions.

The Lord is leading his people into a place of risk. We are learning to do things differently. We are discovering new forms of community. We encounter new ways of praying and worshipping. We long with nostalgia for the sheepfold, for the reassuring ways, the old routines, inherited conventions, 'normal' Anglican practice. But it seems we are being led out of the sheepfold. We are being summoned to explore new ways of relating, different patterns of prayer and alternative ways of worship. Maybe we will never be quite the same again. Maybe the world will never be the same again. We find ourselves changing.... Certainly we rediscover the Church to be not so much a settled institution, a stable fortress of faith but rather, essentially, a pilgrim people, a people on the move, a people stepping forwards with the Risen Christ, a people on a journey of faith...facing the unknown with trust in Christ.

Even it is not possible for us physically, then spiritually, let us dare to allow the Shepherd to lead us *out*.

It feels strange and disorientating when we are out of the sheepfold and find ourselves in unexplored territory of open countryside.

But one thing is sure. We are not alone. We do not face the future by ourselves.

'When he has brought *out* all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.'

Our hearts brim with hope because today Jesus reassures us:

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Great comfort

What image forms in your mind as you read Psalm 23?

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want;
he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil;
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff,
they comfort me (RSV)

This image, as in today's icon, is of a strong shepherd who picks up a fragile lamb and carries it on his shoulders through very difficult terrain. Indeed the terrain is 'the valley of the shadow of death' (RSV), 'the darkest valley' (NIV). **We** are the lamb:



This image resonates so keenly with us right now, as we face such terrain. We gain much reassurance from the idea that The Risen Jesus will carry us through. A bit like the famous *Footprints in the Sand* reflection:

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky.

In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there was one only.

This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints, so I said to the Lord, "You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there has only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?"

The Lord replied, "The years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you."

Mary Stevenson, 1936

May this be our experience and reality right now.

Vocation Sunday

Today is traditionally called 'Vocations Sunday'. It is a day to pray for vocations to the ordained ministry, to religious life, to lay ministry – but more than that, it is a day to ask 'what is God calling me to *be* and to *do* right now?' We each ponder our vocation today because of the Gospel message:

the sheep *listen to his voice*. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because *they know his voice*. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.

Above all, today is a day to listen out for the gentle calling of the Good Shepherd, to attune our hearts that we might actually hear what the Risen Christ wants to say to each one of us. We hold on to his timeless promise:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and a hope”. (Jeremiah 29:11)

And so we pray together:

**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!**

Dr Andrew D Mayes

Parish Priest of Limassol & Spirituality Adviser to the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf