

The King of Love my shepherd is – a wonderful hymn based on a wonderful psalm. It gives such a confident and joyful sense of what it is to be a sheep in the care of this particular shepherd.

What does it mean to be one of Jesus' sheep? Why have so many of us found such comfort in the various versions of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, such that it is known and treasured by people who have never even belonged to a church?

Part of being a sheep is recognizing that one is a sheep, and so recognizing who is the Shepherd. In the first lesson, the authorities are attacking the apostles as if they are claiming some inappropriate authority, doing powerful deeds on their own – but Peter says that they are merely sheep. It is the Shepherd who has brought healing. He explains that the one who healed the man is God, is Jesus Christ, is the true Shepherd.

Sheep are trusting, with good reason. They are trusting because they have a shepherd whose whole focus is their welfare. They are trusting because they recognize the voice of the one who calls them each by name. That I know the shepherd is a lovely thing, but that the shepherd knows me as an individual is so much more remarkable, important, and empowering.

In Baptism we are each called by name and welcomed into the flock. We have the cross signed on our foreheads with oil and the words spoken to us: “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.” From the moment of baptism, we are claimed as sheep of this flock.

Most of all being sheep of the most loving shepherd casts out fear. Yes, there are wolves and lions and leopards and thieves and cliffs and thorn bushes, all manner of dangers. Those were the reality for sheep in biblical times. Metaphorically they are the reality for people in any time. But the Shepherd watches out for all those dangers, protects us, calls us back from the edge of the cliff, carries us home from wherever we have strayed. The shepherd will never forget us, never lose us.

That naming and claiming at baptism, and the promise of a Shepherd always there for us gives us the quiet confidence that will take us through the hardest times. To many we seem now to be living in the “valley of the shadow of death”, but we know that the Shepherd is with us, to comfort us, to lead us. If we live in that confidence, we will be able to recognize the green pastures when we are led to them.

In her communiqué this week the Presiding Bishop points out that times of economic difficulty offer unique opportunities (often in the form of mandates) for simplicity. Her words encourage us to that attitude of trust and confidence that is able to look around, to recognize the peaceful places God is offering us even in the midst of great difficulties.

A while back I watched the improbably delightful movie *Kitt Kittredge, American Girl* which shows a family and friends living through the Great Depression with all manner of challenges and difficulties, but with growing joy and confidence. It shows how simplicity can indeed improve our quality of life, because it improves our quality of relationships, encourages creativity and camaraderie. The people in the movie are very sheeply.

They do not strive for control and independence, but recognize the need for interdependence, for supporting one another so that they can all survive, and perhaps thrive.

Our job as sheep is to live lives of trust and confidence, to be the very best sheep we can, sheep who care for one another, sheep who are always alert to opportunities to serve, as we have been served.

Today's 'Saint of the Week' is Athanasius, a great leader of the early church, who was able to endure five exiles and to remain faithful to the Shepherd he knew and loved despite being frequently urged by Caesars and other powerful people to just stop making trouble, to give in to other people's agendas. He was able to do remain faithful, because the Shepherd had called him by name, let him know that he was loved to 'infinity and beyond,' no matter what. He understood that he was a sheep, guarded and guided by the greatest Shepherd of all. He had extraordinary gifts of leadership and intellect and persuasion, and he used all of them for the benefit of the flock, putting them at the disposal of the Shepherd, without concern for his own safety or well-being.

The life of the flock is the Shalom Deacon Mimi spoke about last week. Shalom, the right ordering of things, the peace that we were created for, the life in which all live in loving relationship with one another and with their creator – this is the life of the sheep whose Shepherd is the King of Love. The Shepherd who guides us through desolate places, who brings us to nourishing and restful places, who invites us to a banquet prepared for us from the beginning of creation.

We know that we are sheep, that we are not in charge of the universe. But as sheep we have been given gifts for the flock, gifts like those of Kitt and Athanasius which can bring closer the reality of Shalom for everyone.

We know Christ is the Shepherd because he laid down his life for us; we know he is the Shepherd because in his rising he inaugurated a whole new kind of life for us

In the epistle John makes the point that as Christ laid down his life for us so ought we to lay down ours for one another. He calls us to love in 'truth and in action'. This is a day on which the Saint James community truly lives that out. In a little while, at the Communion, we will empty our jars and bags and pockets full of coins into our Inasmuch bowls, remembering what Jesus described in his parable about judgement – those who care for others will be blessed, because "inasmuch as ye have done it for the least of these ye have done it for me."

We are blessed in being sheep in the flock of the King of Love. Therefore we have trust, we have confidence – but we also have a call to model our lives on that King of Love: to lay down our selves and our possessions for the good of those around us. That is how to live as sheep of this particular, remarkable shepherd.

I doubt that anyone here commonly uses that wonderful archaic compound word ‘inasmuch’ in common speech. But we remember that saying from the King James translation of the Gospels and so we know what it means, and can say with confidence,

“Inasmuch as Christ, in his infinite love, has laid down his life for us, we are called to give ourselves in love for one another.”

“Inasmuch as God created and loves every person, we are called to love one another.” “Inasmuch as we are indeed sheep, we are called to trust and love and follow our Shepherd.”

“Inasmuch as you as you have contributed or made things for the auction or offer money in the noisy bowls or spend money at the auction, you have given to Christ.”

Everything has been given to the benefit of those in need – and so they have been given to Christ. This is indeed a day of good and sheeply activity.