

Will you pray with me? Almighty God, through the written word and the spoken word, may we know Jesus Christ your living word, amen.

I am the good shepherd.

Such an iconic line isn't it?

Jesus as the good shepherd is one of the greatest images in Christianity, isn't it?

Think about all the paintings, all the sculptures, all the tapestries, and the poetry about Jesus as the shepherd.

Perhaps you yourselves have an image that comes to mind when you think of Christ as the good shepherd.

Perhaps, it's something quite calm, like in psalm 23, and that classic image of Christ holding the lamb near some gentle water comes to mind? It's all very serene, very settled, and very quiet.

Or, perhaps, it's something a bit more like the gospel reading? The idea of Jesus, living rough with the flock, ready to fight those bandits coming to steal and those wolves ready to kill? Jesus the good shepherd becomes something much more rough and ready, and brutal, even.

I am the good shepherd.

It's such an iconic line, in fact, that I don't want us to focus on it today. I want us to think about something else.

Because, I want us to think less about Christ as the shepherd, and more about what it means for us to be his sheep.

Now, if I talk about sheep, what do you think? What sort of characteristics do you associate with sheep?

Perhaps stupid? Perhaps you think about phrases about 'following like a sheep'? That unquestioning, uncritical attitude to just follow something else? Or, maybe that phrase of 'wolf in sheep's clothing', the idea that the sheep is unassuming, not at all dangerous. Really, if someone said to you, 'you're being a sheep right now', would you take it as a compliment? Or, would you be a bit offended?

I thought, frankly, sheep were stupid. They're born, they live on grass, they become sausages, is what I broadly thought.

Which I think is perhaps why it never really sat well with me that we're the sheep. It feels a bit disempowering really.

But, in preparation for this sermon, I thought I'd ask a farmer friend about sheep.

And here's the twist:

Because it turns out, sheep are a) really quite clever, and b) very good at sticking together.

It turns out, that a sheep can recognise around 50 different faces. They can recognise, and remember, around 50 faces, whether that's faces of other sheep, or of humans they interact with a lot.

Not just that, but when shown a photograph of their farmer, they will still recognise them. They can recognise their farmer from a photo.

So, a) turns out sheep are really quite clever.

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b) They're good at sticking together.

What I mean by that, is that they will, if left to their own devices, stay in family units. Their instinct to stay together in flocks is incredibly strong. They will, given the chance, stay in maternal groups for life, so the ewes and the female lambs will stick together, having more generations.

So, sheep are cleverer than they seem, and, they're very good at sticking together.

It feels like being compared to a sheep isn't so bad after all, is it?

But here's the thing, the sheep, even while they're much cleverer than they might seem, still need the shepherd.

The sheep could manage on their own, sure. They can survive in the wilderness, but it costs. It costs lives, it costs lambs, life is hard. But, with the guidance of the shepherd, life becomes so much better, so much easier. They're given greener pastures, they just have to live there.

And, as God's sheep, sure, we could scrape by on our own, trusting in our own cleverness and by sticking together.

But, by looking to Christ as our shepherd, life becomes so much better, so much richer.

When we allow ourselves to be guided by God, to be led by God, and occasionally to be chased up by God's collie dog when we're going astray, we can live such better lives individually, and a better life together as a church.

So, this Sunday, I want you to remember that when we're sheep, that is to mean that we are clever, we are good at sticking together and being a family, but we allow ourselves to be guided, we allow ourselves to be loved, and we allow God to love us.

Amen.