

# Leavening Methodist Church

## Thought for Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> May – the Lord is our shepherd. (Peter Sheasby)

I'm always wary of talking about sheep and shepherding in a rural area, I know that many people know far more than I do about them. I am aware that the last couple of months many local farmers have been up day and night coping with lambing alongside the Covid-19 crisis. For most of us it is harder to identify with sheep and shepherds today than it was in Biblical times; then nearly everyone understood both the job and the symbolism of Jesus' words about being the Good Shepherd. Jesus builds on this oft used image from the Jewish scriptures, not least in [Psalm 23](#). We have to remember that those who first knew God were nomad herders - you can still see them in Israel & Arabia today - which means that shepherding is even older than arable farming, maybe the oldest profession of all!

The shepherd and sheep have a mutual relationship; the sheep need the shepherd – for food, shearing, help lambing etc., the shepherd needs sheep – to provide a livelihood. So if Jesus is the Shepherd, how are we sheep? Some people think that sheep are foolish and daft: they follow the flock, unthinking, often get themselves into danger, and can't look after themselves. In Jesus' time, and even now, sheep are actually quite intelligent and to a large extent are well able to look after themselves. As Jesus says "the sheep hear my voice and come when I call their name". They depend on the Shepherd when things go wrong and they need help to get them out of trouble – the lost sheep is a warning to us all.

*You were like sheep that had lost their way, but now you have been brought back to follow the Shepherd and Keeper of your souls. [1 Peter 2:25](#)*

In the reading for today from [John 10](#), Jesus claims many roles: the shepherd, the sheep-fold, the gate. He watches out for us, he is our refuge and he is the gate to keep us safe from any outside harm. Later, after the resurrection, Jesus commands Peter to take on his Shepherding cloak, to carry the staff and take care of the sheep. He passes on the responsibility for both watching over the flock and increasing those in the sheepfold. We can visualise shepherding as the church's pastoral care and similarly we understand the Church as the sheepfold, a place of refuge. Of course I see this in my calling as a minister but it is everyone's calling to be both sheep under the one Good Shepherd and also to be the shepherd to God's sheep, especially the hungry and lost. When we know we are going to move ministry Chris & I have often visited [St. Cuthbert's shrine in Durham Cathedral](#) and prayed for guidance. As we approached this latest move I was moved to read St Cuthbert's Prayer:

*Merciful God, who called Cuthbert from following the flock to be a shepherd of your people: Mercifully grant that we also may go without fear to dangerous and remote places, to seek the indifferent and the lost; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Maybe we were being called somewhere to do with sheep. So I was really pleased to see we were coming to live in Pinfold Garth – the Pinfold is the place where the lost sheep were safely kept until their owners reclaimed them!

My particular question today is how are we the Gate? Are we open to help other people into the safety of the sheepfold? In the current Covid-19 crisis, when our churches are closed, the door (gate) firmly shut on the building, how do we show we have an open attitude to others? There is some evidence that more people are taking an interest in spiritual matters, not least in how many people are engaging with online services and other internet-based links. Is it that people are willing to participate in worship as long as they don't have to go to a church? More importantly are we helping people to find some hope in Jesus as well as finding comfort in prayer?

At all times, but especially in the current circumstances we look to Jesus to be our shepherd, recognising our need, knowing we are but sheep.