

**Fourth Sunday of Easter
3rd May 2020**



Dear Friends in Christ,

'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'
(John 10: 10)

At the height of the Civil War in Lebanon in the 1980's, over one hundred individuals from across the world were taken hostage and imprisoned. Some of these people sadly did not survive the ordeal. It has been humbling in recent days to listen to a programme on Radio 4 called *'The Reunion'* in which three of these remarkable individuals, John McCarthy, Brian Keenan and Terry Waite, have been brought together to share the experiences of their incarceration. Their silences during the programme spoke eloquently of unimaginable suffering at the hands of their captors. Often chained, blindfolded and held in solitary confinement, they were beaten, starved and deprived of any contact – both from other captives and from the outside world. Each man was held for almost five years. Chastening statistics indeed as we traverse our current predicament:

1,574 days – Brian Keenan

1,763 days - Terry Waite

1,943 days - John McCarthy

Brian, Terry and John have spoken movingly of the ways in which they managed to survive as hours became days and eventually spread into years. Surprisingly, they each mentioned the unexpected gift of time which solitude brought; allowing them to reflect on the many blessings of their lives: the people they loved, the places they had visited, books they had read. They also spoke of the importance of developing a personal spirituality, of faith and hope and love, in the space this strange and challenging time afforded them.

Brian Keenan found a deep imperative to relational being. He writes:

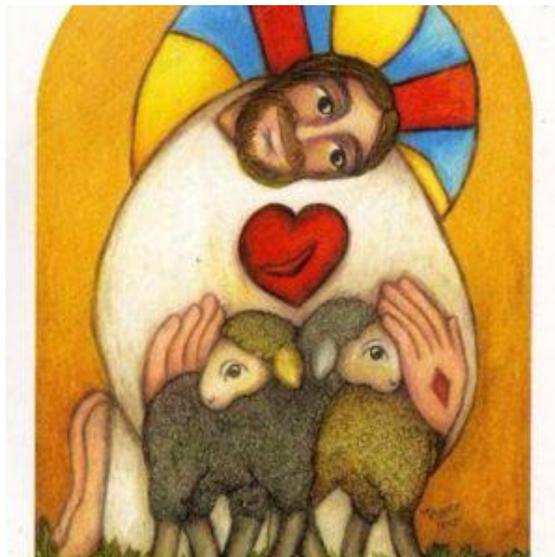
'There's a marked difference between aloneness and loneliness. I quite enjoy solitude but loneliness is different. We all need somebody to talk to, explain things to. If we don't have that we don't have validation and life lacks meaning.'



Terry Waite has also written on the imperative of forging meaningful relationships:

'We are incomplete within ourselves, and sometimes impossible demands are made [upon us] to fill that lack. Perhaps the most satisfactory relationship between two people is where the relationship enables each to be more complete rather than one party being robbed of identity or dominated by the other.'

This understanding of an equality in relationship is at the heart of the unconditional love the Good Shepherd has for his sheep in today's Gospel message: *'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'* It is a message designed to help us be the best that we can be, both in ourselves and in relationship with others as we flourish in the perfect light of Jesus' love.



The Loving Shepherd - Anon

As Coronavirus Lockdown moves into the month of May, amidst the voices of frustration and distress from people feeling the agony of not being able to be in close relationship with their loved ones and the society from which they feel cruelly separated, there is a growing voice of gratitude, similar to the experiences of these three hostages, at the unexpected gift of time which enforced isolation has given us.

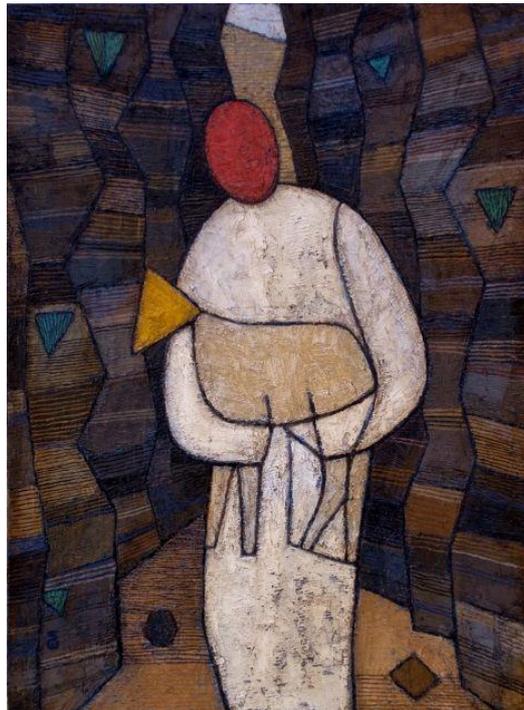
In radio and television programmes, contributors speak of their surprise and delight at being able to breathe out from the busy-ness of their lives prior to Coronavirus restrictions. This sentiment is echoed by the many parishioners I speak to each week on the telephone. I am moved by the way people are responding to the 'new normal' of self-isolation. In all our villages, individuals and families are forging new and deeper relationships with neighbours they hadn't had much contact with before the beginning of March. They are finding the time to call family and old friends. People are sharing of themselves in generous and thoughtful ways which speaks deeply into the Gospel of Christ as He asks us to love one another with the same care and compassion and desire for social justice with which He loved us.

Though our physical churches are closed, the ministry of worship and love continues.



'Seeing Shepherds II' by Daniel Bonnell

I am moved by the ways so many of you have cheerfully responded to the challenge of supporting those in need of food shopping and prescription collections etc., and I am incredibly grateful to my Lay-ministry team and PCC's as they support my work. As a result of the impact of Coronavirus on our communities, I have needed to focus on the growing number of acutely ill parishioners and their families who cannot attend their loved ones in hospitals and care-homes; and responding to the dying and their bereaved families. I have also needed to distance myself in ways I would never have imagined as a priest, in order to ensure I avoid any possibility of spreading the virus. My proverbial sock drawer remains woefully unattended, as any time off I thought I might have had has melted away in the enormity of the current workload, and I ask for your forbearance if I haven't been able to reach out to you personally in the way you might expect of me in the normal pattern of my pastoral ministry.



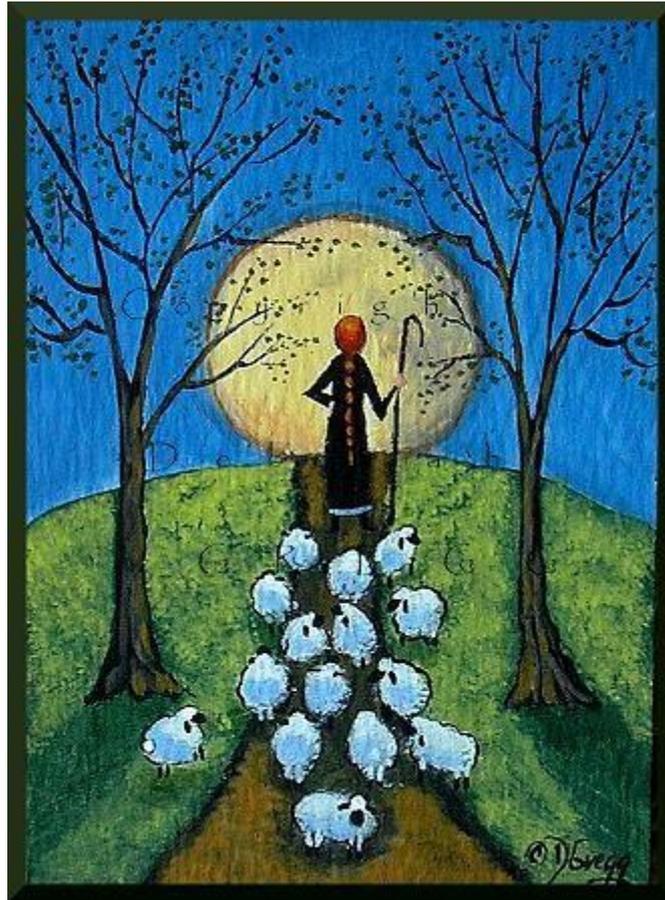
The Good Shepherd by Soichi Watanabe

We are good shepherds when we love those entrusted to us, praying for them, spending our time and talents for their welfare, and guarding them from physical and spiritual dangers. For some, this ministry of love takes on a pragmatic, pastoral presence. Our team of Parish Visitors are in regular telephone contact during Lockdown with many folks around the Benefice who are sick or who find themselves overwhelmed and in need of someone to talk to. There is a much needed ministry in this time of crisis, as I am simply not able to manage this pastoral work on my own. For others in our Church team, the ministry might be administrative - keeping Across the Downs and Parish Magazines on track; Treasurers are balancing dwindling incomes in order to keep our parishes afloat; others ensure our church buildings remain safe despite being closed; more still work to maintain our churchyards for families and friends to find sanctuary in remembrance of loved ones. Whether you are acting formally on behalf of the Church at this time, or one of the many 'angels' in our parishes, my heartfelt thanks go out to you as you mirror the Shepherd's love to His flock.



The image of the Good Shepherd has, from the earliest time, been woven into Christian belief. We have beautiful pictures of Jesus carrying home a lost sheep high on His shoulders, affirming Jesus as caring, concerned, strong and tender-hearted over every one little fluffy ball of wool which had gone astray. The picture tugs at all human heart-strings, even though in this day and age, very few of us can lay claim to any direct understanding of the difficulties and challenges of being a shepherd.

The image of the sheep itself always seems to have a bit of an embarrassed look on it's face, as if it is saying: *'Oh, no. Silly me – lost again. Thank goodness you found me! That wolf was pretty close this time!!'* Yet when a sheep gets to know the shepherd's voice, they are wise enough to be totally dependent on him to lead them to fresh pastures and to keep them out of harm's way, day and night. I know I will have shared with many of you my experience as a newly ordained priest with a sparkly new clerical collar trying to shift a huge sheep off the old Ringwood road where it was causing a huge tailback across the New Forest. Try as I might, I could not shift the silly animal. It looked at me, I looked at it. Stalemate – until the farmer arrived in a pick-up truck. One quiet word to the sheep from him and it trotted off and jumped gamely into the back of his truck. Hilarious for the other drivers and me alike, because, in my priestly garb I was proving to be a rubbish shepherd of the sheep! However, this experience taught me a great deal about what it means to be in real relationship with others: how no amount of cajoling or persuading can have any effect unless *we speak from the heart* and take the time and energy to learn where the other is in their life – authentic, unconditional love!



'Road Block' by Deborah Gregg

John's Gospel takes us to meet Jesus in Jerusalem. It's almost the end of Jesus' third visit here in His ministry before He goes back across the River Jordan after the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple; a story yet to come in John's narrative. Throughout *this* section of the Gospel (from Chapter 7 through to the end of Chapter 10), John has been developing the theme of Jesus as light; a concept first opened up to us in his prologue which tells us: *'the light shines in the darkness and the darkness can never extinguish it.'* John sets the narrative of the Good Shepherd in Chapter 10, right after the section which describes Jesus healing a blind man on the Sabbath: that fabulous juxtaposition between a man physically blind yet spiritually envisioned and the Pharisees, who claim spiritual superiority and yet who are in reality fumbling about in the darkness of their prejudice and disbelief; totally blind to the Messiah standing right in front of them. The blind man, by contrast, proclaims *'I believe! He knows Jesus as the Messiah and he worships Him. He worships the light, just as Jesus chastises the Pharisees for worshipping the darkness!*

The Good Shepherd narrative develops these themes, introducing ideas such as 'hearing the voice' and 'knowing the shepherd and the sheep' and of walking in the light of His love: of knowing and not knowing Jesus. Jesus uses this powerful imagery to teach us something about Himself. Actually, in the original Greek text, the Good Shepherd is not called *'agathos'* which means good, but *'kalos'* which means beautiful or perfect. Jesus points at the close relationship between Him and His disciples: *'I know my own and my own know me'* Jesus says. (10: 10) It demonstrates to us how He loves us no matter how many times we lose our sense of spiritual direction.



'The Good Shepherd' by Dr He Qi

Jesus won't just wait for us to come back to Him, He will actively seek us out with a love that knows no limit! As the perfect shepherd, appointed by God, Jesus is in charge of the flock and He lets us know He is prepared to give up His life for us – that we might live in the light of His love rather than the darkness of our wayward sinfulness.

Jesus' gift to us is eternal life and our spiritual survival is based on our recognising the proper pathways we must follow throughout our earthly lives - full as they are with sorrows and joys, especially in these straightened times of Lockdown. John tells us: stick with the Perfect Shepherd despite and because, and He will bring us security and peace. Clinging to Him, just as the embarrassed sheep depicted around His neck finally learns to do, is a sure guarantee that we won't go astray, but that we will live our lives to the full through the freedom of His eternal love.

On Easter Day, when Christ appeared to the disciples, they were filled with the Spirit and became convinced followers of *'The Way'*. Their lives were transformed by a lively faith and a new purpose. The same is true for us. Once we call ourselves Christian, everything we do must be impacted by that choice. Jesus calls us to be loving, caring people with a mind through which Christ thinks; a heart through which Christ loves; a voice through which Christ speaks and hands through which Christ works.



The Shepherd by Anselm Kiefer

In our Christian lives, we must ask the question: How as a church and as individuals are we responding to the voice of Jesus calling us to be shepherds of His flock, through all the ordinary and not-so-ordinary realities of our daily lives? The presence of Coronavirus among us has helped society to respond to this question, in all the ways I have set out above. For many of us, our thoughts are about what happens after Lockdown has been lifted. A common fear now is that we slip back into our old ways! Our faith should shape our lives, and yet all too often we find our lives shape our faith as we struggle to make sense of all that life throws at us. I hope that, whilst I have been your Incumbent here, I have shared my faith and my struggle with you in and through the unfolding chapters of my own life's ups and downs. You have certainly done that for me! I know that I have grown as a Christian in and through the privilege of being able to walk alongside each of you in so many different ways. What you have taught me is that every task we take on, no matter how great or how small, when undertaken with humility and grace is a sign of true love. I pray that we do not lose sight of this gift once our world recovers from the scourge of Coronavirus.

The story of the blind man who is able to see, and spiritually created anew by Jesus; and that of the Perfect Shepherd brings us closer to understanding the love of God the Father for His Son *and* for the world; for each of us. *'I know each of you, and I will lay down my life for you.'* He asks us to live in that same light; to walk in the safe pasture He blesses us with; and to love in that same selfless way by which He loves us.



The Good Shepherd, by Sieger Köder

From the outset of Lockdown, I made a decision not to personally 'live-stream' services from my home. I can assure you this is not as a result of ineptitude or laziness on my part! My decision is based on the pragmatic reality that there are many other resources in our Diocese and around the Church of England which can better support our worship at this time. I am also mindful that not everyone has a reliable internet connection or access to online technology, so I have been focussing my outreach in other ways.

Caroline McAulay in our Benefice Office has been a star, working with me to update our Benefice website *every day* to ensure that we offer a rich and varied range of such services for all tastes and ages. I am wondering whether people are sufficiently aware of our Website or have looked at our online resources? Please spread the news!!

Our vibrant website is easily found – just google **'The Downs Benefice'** and you will find links to all we are doing, including the weekly Newsletters I am sending out into many hundreds of homes. I am touched and delighted by the many emails and messages of support I have received saying how much people have benefitted spiritually from them - we have even received glowing feedback from Christians in Mexico who have been enjoying these newsletters!

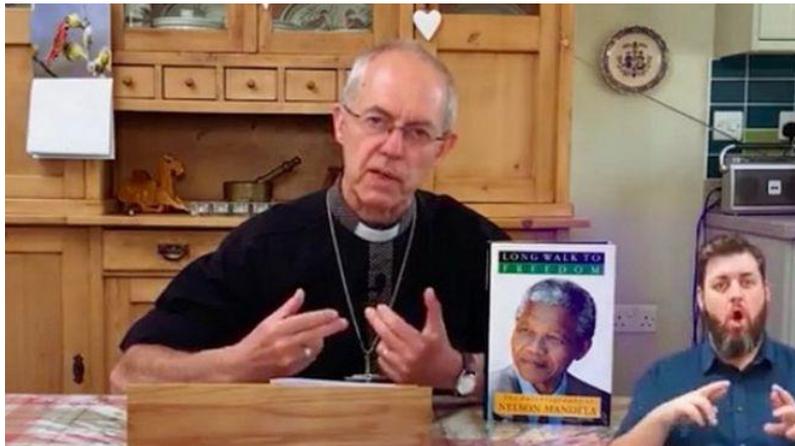
Lockdown is a time for all of us to learn new coping mechanisms, and it is also an opportunity for many to learn new gifts and skills! I have entered into this brave new world and have been holding successful meetings via online social video conferencing platforms such as 'Zoom' and 'GoToMeeting' etc. I wonder whether PCC meetings will ever be the same again?!



Charlotte Nash is one of the gifted people in our Benefice who has been using Zoom to continue her ministry to her Home Group, enabling them to hold virtual gatherings and continue in much-valued fellowship and bible study. Charlotte has felt called to expand this ministry and in the coming weeks will be offering **Morning Prayer via Zoom**. Have a look at our Benefice Website for more information on how to join with Charlotte on Zoom for these prayer services. Carol Coleman is another wonder! She has put together a special **online Café Church service for this Sunday, 3rd May**. The theme of this service is '*Encounter with Jesus*,' and though we encourage you to enjoy it in lieu of the regular 4pm Café Church slot this Sunday, it can be viewed at any time that suits you! You will find the link on the Benefice Website and via Facebook.



At 10am on Thursday in this past week, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, generated an online resource for the many children and teachers across our country who are continuing to operate in schools so that key workers can continue to run our wonderful NHS and staff other essential services. Called 'The Biggest Assembly Ever,' Mrs Gwilliam from Sparsholt Primary School tells me she linked her cohort of children in school with families joining in at home as part of their Remote Learning Day. Everyone involved said how excellent it was and I pray this will be another new way of us sharing the love of Jesus who cares for every single one of His sheep.



The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, leading The Biggest Assembly



Another initiative of the Church of England this week speaks into the point I made earlier in this letter. A new **free national telephone Prayer Helpline** called **Daily Hope** has been launched as a resource for people in isolation who do not have access to computers or online activity. Please pass this number on to any of your family, friends and neighbours who you feel might benefit from this resource. The service promises a range of 'music, hymns, prayers and daily reflections as well as worship services' to anyone who dials in on the impressively memorable number of **0800 804 8044**.

Next Friday, 8th May, our country will mark the **75th anniversary of VE Day**, to enable people to pay tribute to those who served in one of the most significant events in our country's history. The occasion will remember the contribution of British, Commonwealth and Allied armed forces personnel; those who contributed to the war effort and safeguarded the Home Front. As well as marking the Allies' victory in 1945, commemoration will serve as an opportunity to pay tribute to those who have served and continue to serve in the UK Armed Forces and their families. VE Day was first celebrated on 8 May 1945 when Allied Forces formally accepted Germany's surrender. In line with the latest expert medical and scientific advice, VE Day 75 events will be scaled back due to the ongoing spread of coronavirus.



Bruno Peek LVO OBE OPR Pageantmaster VE Day 75 is encouraging us all to join in with a 'Nation's Toast to the Heroes of WW2' at **3pm on the 8th May**, from the safety of their own home. There is also an idea for us all to join in prayer at **10.30am on Sunday, 10th May** in lieu of the church services we had planned. During the week, I will be sending out another email with more VE Day information and an Order of Service so that we can all gather together to remember and give thanks for the few who gave so much to so many.



As we think of the sacrifices of so many during wars, hostage situations and in this current war against Coronavirus, we find the presence of our Lord and Saviour alongside us. As we journey through May in the shadow of Coronavirus, our light at the end of the tunnel is knowing we are in the care of the Perfect Shepherd. So, in this gift of time, may God bless each of you. May you feel the loving arms of the Perfect Shepherd carrying you throughout all that is to come in your lives. May you open your eyes and your hearts to the freedom of the Shepherd's eternal love - a divine gift through which He lay down His life for His beloved sheep to have perfect life!

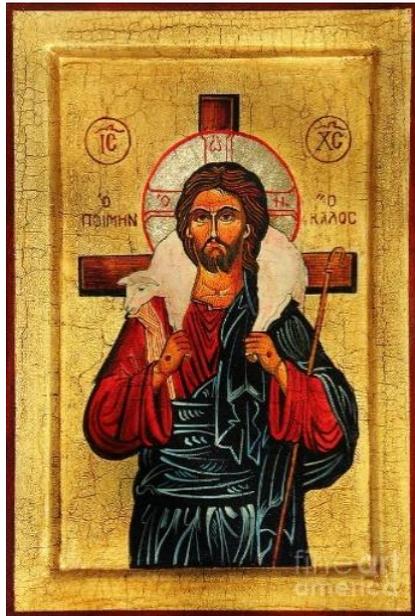
Yours, in the gift of Easter time!

Jax

Revd Jax Machin, Rector, The Downs Benefice

Collect Prayer for the Week – The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Almighty God, whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life: raise us, who trust in him, from the death of sin to the life of righteousness, that we may seek those things which are above, where he reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.



John 10:1-10 - The Good Shepherd and His Sheep

'Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and 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.' Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore Jesus said again, 'Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'

