

**A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole**  
**The Fourth Sunday of Easter**  
**Sunday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020**

Acts 2: 42--47  
Psalm 23  
1 Peter 2:19-25  
John 10:1-10

As you probably can't have escaped knowing, I had a little brush with the COVID 19 Virus a few weeks back. I must admit I had not thought that my 15 mins of fame promised by Andy Warhol, was to be for being sick! Well no such thing as bad publicity I suppose, and being "patient zero" has given me a chance to say some words for the faith and for Christ Church to a lot of people.

Three weeks in a room on your own with occasional visits from very nice nurses with covered faces is a surreal experience in lots of ways. I heard Bishop Marianne speak a couple of weeks ago and she was saying that human beings live by telling and remembering stories. Faced with a new challenge like this Virus, she suggested that the first thing we human beings do is to look back into our past and look for stories that help us makes sense of and deal with the new challenge set before us.

I think that is right and I found myself doing just that in the hospital. I thought back to my days in the Army when we had to cope with danger and loss and hardship at times. Also, as a chaplain, times of leading quite a solitary existence. Speaking to people all day, but always on your own in the small room allocated to you at night often lying on the floor with your helmet on in the dark when attacks happened.

Yet, at the time when I was most sick and not able to think very clearly it was not those stories of dealing with danger or difficulty that came to me. Instead, I remember thinking about lying in bed as a sick child and listening to the loud calling of the pigeons outside my window in the Rectory garden I grew up in.

It was a huge garden since the Rectory at Lasswade had been a farmhouse at one time and the Church had actually been build in part of the grounds. It was way, way out with my parents means to manage properly beyond keeping the grass cut. There was a meadow with 40 fully grown trees, an acre of vegetable garden, a tennis court that was now on a steep slope because it had been cultivated during the war and a sunken lawn with a thick shrubbery that made an excellent jungle. All of it was wonderful

place for a young boy to grow up in and to imagine all the adventures that young boys do. In my memory at least, it has a mystical and magical atmosphere. From time to time that garden comes to me as it did in that bare hospital room recently, a little as I imagine Wordsworth describes in his poem 'Tintern Abbey' as he describes how familiar pastoral scenes come to him.

But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din  
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,  
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;  
And passing even into my purer mind  
With tranquil restoration:

Up in Glen Loth in Sutherland, in the highlands of Scotland, you can find a large circular dry-stone walled enclosure about 20ft across. The walls are about four or five feet high and there is a gap about the size of a doorway but no door or gate in it. Just one way in and one way out.

These structures are actually found in many glens around the north of Scotland and they are sheep pens. They have no door or gate because the shepherd, in days gone by at least, would herd the sheep into the pen for the night and then lie down in the entrance making himself the door. No predator or thief could get to the sheep except, literally, through him. Amazingly perhaps, this was exactly the same arrangement that Jesus knew in first century Palestine. "I am the door of the sheep" he says. I am the shepherd who lays his body across the entrance and puts himself between the wolves and the sheep.

So, he is the shepherd we are the sheep. But sheep are, or at least certainly seem to be, stupid, frightened creatures who cling pathetically together and blindly follow the herd, they know not where.

In 2005 in the eastern Van Province of Turkey, Turkish shepherds watched in horror as hundreds of their sheep followed each other over a cliff. First one sheep went over the cliff edge, and then another, and then the whole flock. According to the reports more than 400 sheep died in the 15-metre fall - their bodies cushioning the fall for the other 1,100 who still followed them over the edge but who survived.

To be compared to sheep is, let's face it, not very flattering!

People do exhibit this same sheep like or herd following inclination at times though don't they? It leads to the expression "Sheeple", people who behave like sheep.

CS Lewis, in his famous book, "Mere Christianity" argues that we do have many natural instincts, like the herd instinct, but we also have something else.

"Supposing you hear a cry for help from a man in danger." Lewis says, "You will probably feel two desires — one desire to give help (due to your herd instinct), the other a desire to keep out of danger (due to the instinct for self-preservation). But you will find inside you, in addition to these two impulses, a third thing which tells you that you ought to follow the impulse to help, and suppress the impulse to run away."

That third thing, Lewis says, is our moral sense, that by which we can choose to follow the herd or choose not to.

In Albert Camus book, “The Plague” he describes the effects of a pestilence that sweeps through the French Algerian city of Oran. Camus, despite everything, in the end sees much to be hopeful about in human beings responses to such crisis.

“To state quite simply”, he says, “what we learn in time of pestilence: is that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.”

So far, I think we have seen the truth of this in great quantities in our current crisis. Here in our own parish as people have reached out to each other to connect and support. We see it also in the courage of the doctors and nurses who have continued to do their jobs despite the risks, all over the country.

The danger for us, is perhaps more in what lies ahead. Will we be able to choose well which instincts to encourage and which to suppress? Will we be able to suppress our herd instinct so we don't just follow the crowd and, when it is right, will we have the courage to suppress our self-preservation instinct when the urgent needs of others require an element of risk in us to

address? I think we will need to think maturely about risk and effect.

Consider carefully what risk is reasonable and necessary and faithful, on the one hand, and what is reckless and faithless on the other.

In doing this we will need to listen carefully for the voice of the Good Shepherd of our souls. He is the one who calls to us in the three gardens of our lives. The garden of our youth and innocence; the garden where we must all watch with him in our last day in the olive grove; and the garden of the Resurrection, where we all hope and trust that we shall meet him one day.

When Lorraine came to get me from the hospital it was the most wonderful Easter experience. From the dark bare isolation room, I found myself in the Georgetown sunshine, looking at the trees covered with blossom. It was like stepping from a black and white movie into a full color one. However dark and bare the rooms this virus has placed us in may be, The Good Shepherd's promise stands. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."