



# CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

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"Called by Name" - The Fourth Sunday of Easter - 5/3/2020

## Lessons for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

It is an incredible privilege to be able to even bring up and to speak about the promises of God that we have in today's gospel. Because in so many ways, as Christians have known from the beginning of Christianity, from the first strata of our tradition, the fundamental title that we give to Jesus in addition to being the son of God or Lord and Savior or Prince of Peace is the Good Shepherd.

And that's because in the Gospels we have this incredible promise to us. In the Gospels we are told that Jesus Christ calls us by name, and that we follow His voice and that He has made the way possible for us that we can find our way to God. And from the beginning, this incredible promise of God, this incredible promise of Christ, this has been identified with what happens to us at baptism when we are given a name and we're baptized into Christ's body. But it goes even deeper than the sacraments because you have in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, this incredible saying that Jesus gives when He is being criticized for welcoming tax collectors and prostitutes and people who are considered unworthy.

Jesus said, who among you if you would lose one, sheep would not forsake your 99 and go and find that sheep and carry that sheep home on your shoulders rejoicing? So it is in heaven when one sinner repents.

And all of us know who find ourselves comforted by the gospel at any point, all of us know what it's like to feel ourselves on the shoulders of our Lord. To be carried home and to be brought back into the fold, to be reconciled with God, to know in some sense that joy and love and peace that comes to us through Jesus Christ. And the voice of Christ is a promise to us. It's a promise to you and it's a promise to me. It's a promise that God understands us.

God knows all of the things that we are struggling with this day. God knows all the gifts before us this day. God knows that this beautiful sunny day is ours for the taking, and God knows all the ways that we are yearning and looking and hoping that we would find in him some kind of sense of being understood and loved and

accepted and forgiven, and the good news of the gospel is that we hear the voice of God through Jesus, and Jesus hears our voice of prayer. So we are invited in and we are transformed by the love that God gives to us.

It's important for us to keep that promise of God in front of us in this time of pandemic, in this time in which we were kind of frustrated by the constraints that are upon us. We are terrified about what might happen to us, we are encountering economic instability. And we are face to face with all of the injustices in our society in this time in which we can feel so far away from God when we have been cooped up with our family.

And by this point, if any of you are living with a family right now, they are seeing parts of you you don't want anybody to see. They have seen you lose your temper. They've seen you get frustrated. They've seen you retreat, they've seen you isolate. They've seen you try to engage, they've seen you do the small things you do to try to reconcile. We have seen each other as our full selves if you are living as a family at this moment.

And the good news is that in the midst of everything, in the midst of all that, you are experiencing in the midst of the temptations that surround you, the midst of the frustrations that you feel, the midst of the fears that shake you, in the midst of the joys that are starting to break around you like the sunlight today, Christ is speaking his voice to you yet again, and that voice welcomes you through the gate of His mercy, through the infinite love that He has, and you are to be taken home by Him on His shoulders rejoicing.

And that is what it means to be a Christian, fundamentally, and from the beginning, Christians have in their depictions of who Christ is. They didn't always paint Him with a beard, but the earliest Christians depicted Him carrying a lamb on His shoulders, an image that they drew from the kind of cultural ferment around them. This is one of the ancient images of what good people do.

And Christians took that image of a shepherd carrying a sheep on his shoulders and saw in it the confirmation of the scriptures that we have about Christ, the Good Shepherd, and in their early catacombs, they painted that image of Christ starting with the third century. And this was the first image of God that someone would see having spent their days looking for what it must be like to see Jesus, they would see Him as a good shepherd.

And the task for us today is to not only hear the voice of God that comes to us through Christ, but it's also to continue to use these scriptures as kinds of spectacles to see Christ in the world around us. And to help us do that, I've picked a couple of pieces of art that I hope you'll enjoy and that will be a blessing to you. They are incredible pieces. They unfold the passage from John in ways that I have not even touched yet, and they're important for us to see and maybe

to help us to see where God is going in our lives, where Christ, the Good Shepherd is asking us to see.

And the first one is from Philip Galle. He was a 17th century primarily engraver. He was an incredible scholar and teacher. Many people actually called him the second Erasmus because of his learning and his faith. He was from the Netherlands and he was famous for taking illustrations by Pieter Bruegel and kind of moving them into a print and then using that print to reach people.

And this is one of his famous prints of the Parables of Jesus. And this is, Christ, the Good Shepherd. And in the center of it, you have this incredible iconic representation of Christ carrying a lamb on His shoulders. This has been an image that has been part of the visual Canon of the Western church since the third century, and yet here there's a slightly different depiction of it.

In the usual depiction, He is standing upright and He's triumphant, just like you read in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. But here, this Christ has bent over slightly and He is a bit weary, but He is determined. And He's an older man. In fact, you can see by His feet that He actually has older feet and He is bending down as He is moving through what Galle calls a stable and He's going through the gate.

And that is meant to represent not only a gate that Christ is moving through, a kind of passage that He is going through, but also the Christ himself is the gate. Because in the reading from John today, Jesus at one point says, I am the gate of the sheep. And that's exactly what you see written here in Latin.

John Chapter 10, I am the gate of the sheep. And so Jesus, the Good Shepherd is carrying the sheep through this gate, and this is meant to be a kind of vision of the Cross of the sacrifice Jesus makes for us on the Cross so that we can receive the grace and forgiveness of God, which is infinite because Jesus's love on the Cross was infinite.

And so that is why you have a slightly bowed Jesus. You have a Jesus who is moving as if He is carrying a cross. But in fact, he's carrying a lamb and that's meant to teach us a lesson about what's going on. When Jesus calls himself the good shepherd and the gate, it means that through the Cross, you and I have been reconciled with God.

There's nothing we can do to merit God's love for us. There's nothing we can accomplish that will be enough to make God love us, but God chooses to love us in Christ. God's forgiveness is infinite. God's love is infinite. God's acceptance is infinite. God's empathy is infinite, and you and all of who you are and all of the challenges you're facing and all of the things that weigh you down, of all the things that seem to confine you, of all the things that you are experiencing in your life, both joyful and sorrowful, you are loved by God.

And holding onto that love for Galle is everything as he sees in the scripture for today from John, because all around him you have this, these incredible symbolic representations. You have the hireling who comes in a little bit later than what we're reading, running away from the sheep when the wolf comes, because the hireling does not care for the sheep, and yet you have a good shepherd over here defending the sheep from the wolf.

You have all of these individuals trying to break in and steal the sheep away. One of them has a sheep bringing them through the doorway, through the side of the stable and has his hand around the bell so the sheep will not make a noise. And over here you have soldiers with lanterns beating away and picking away at the stable. And then you have thieves who are trying to break in from the top and kind of move in and take advantage of what they have that's what's inside, and that is the sheep.

And this is meant to be an important reminder to us because particularly with an image like the good shepherd, there's a tendency to simply see this as a kind of pastoral image, as a kind of image that you would see in the farm or in wonderful relationships that we have with animals or even pets. But in fact, to claim that Christ is our Good Shepherd is to recognize that we are surrounded by people who want our attention, people who want to draw us a way. People who want to consume us, people who want to abuse us in ways that if we go to, we will find our ruin. But Christ, the Shepherd is leading us from the stable into pasture. Christ, the Shepherd is also the gate.

And at the bottom of this incredible deep and beautiful etching, there are a couple of lines from another humanist that is known, Hadrianus Junius, and he writes the following in Latin. Over here, he writes, come under my roof here in this safe stable you people.

While I am the shepherd of the sheep, the door stays open. While I am the shepherd of the sheep, the door stays open. So despite all of the evil and all of the things that oppress, Jesus has made it so that the gate is always open to you.

And then over here at the bottom you have, why are you breaking down the walls and the roof? That is the law of wolves and thieves whom my sheep fold renounces. That is the law of wolves and thieves. You and I have an opportunity to reflect on the laws that we live by when Christ becomes our good shepherd. And of course we see an image of that in our reading from Acts today when the earliest disciples gathered all that they had and gave it and held it in common and cared for anyone and gave to anyone as each had need. And that image of justice is an image of the love the Christ, the good shepherd shows us.

The next image I have for you is an incredible piece that is done by John Everett Millais. This is from the 19th century. Millais was a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which was a group of artists that banded together and would dedicate themselves to somehow carrying on some of the traditions that you

would have with Galle's engravings to kind of maintain the kind of hand work that's required in the skill and also the symbolism that would inspire. Because they believed that there was something powerful and holy in emblematic scenes like this.

And so Millais's Parable of the Good Shepherd is of a shepherd who has been slain, a shepherd who has laid down his life for the sheep. And immediately you see a connection between this Jesus who is bearing a sheep as if he is bearing a cross. And this shepherd who has fully paid the price of the protection he offers to the sheep, he's fully been slaughtered much as Jesus was crucified on the Cross.

And next to Jesus, there is a ram or a lamb that is on its side, and that is meant to symbolize two things. It symbolizes both that Christ is the lamb who was slain from before the foundation of the world, as we read in Revelations, and we see an image of that at the very top of our church, in which you have the lamb who comes reigning the Agnus Dei. And you also have the ram who was caught in a thicket in the Book of Genesis. And that's the moment in which Abraham who had been commanded somehow by God to offer his son Isaac, and who is stopped by an angel, turns, and instead offers a ram in Isaac's place. And that again is meant to magnify what's happening with the idea of the Cross because it's on the Cross that Jesus takes our place and suffers the punishment for sin that you and I would have suffered.

And then finally you have up here this incredible picture of a lion. Some might wonder, is the lion hunting? Well, he's not hunting because the sheep have run, but the lion is not chasing them, and the lion is sitting in a kind of regal way, looking at the whole scene before him unbothered and kind of steady, and that is meant to convey another image of Christ, the lion of Judah.

And that was the lion who manages all things and who has a kingdom that he is coming into and will bring peace and justice to his people and will bring the love of God and make it real. This is the lion who will come and be the lamb who will come and wipe away our tears. It's this image of the lion of Judah that C.S. Lewis used to develop his depiction of Aslan who was the Christ figure in his writings. Aslan is loving, but he is not tame and nor should any of us see in these moments in which the shepherd has laid down his life and become weak anything like any kind of, any kind of true weakness in the sense that the lion will compensate, the lion balances, that the death of Christ will be answered by his resurrection.

And so we have these two images in which we are invited to see Christ. And this one, there's a kind of bivalence, a kind of invitation for us to see the majesty of Christ, which is conveyed through the face of the lion is matched by the meekness of Christ, which is conveyed by the sense of the lamb and the shepherd who lays down his life. And this is to elevate for us and for us to see as if for the first time what it means to worship Christ as our Lord and Savior.

What does it mean for you to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd? Where do you see Christ when you put on this passage from John and look at the world around you? On April 7th, I went and I was doing last rites over the phone, which is something I never thought I would do as a priest because of the pandemic. I can't go into hospitals anymore. I can't bless people. I can't anoint them with oil and say prayers and gather the family. Instead I have to do things over the phone. And this is a reminder to me of my own limitations as a person, my own limitations as a pastor during this time, which I have to do a workaround as best I can.

And on April 7th, John Albrecht was in the hospital and was dying, and I called the nurses' station and I contacted someone named Michelle, a nurse there, and I said, could I somehow say some prayers of last rites for John? And Michelle put the phone on hold and then picked up the phone when she was in John's room and she said that she would hold the phone next to John and she would tell them who was calling.

And so she told John and I read the prayers for him, and he understood what I was reading, and I told him that he was a lamb of the flock of God, a sheep of the fold of God, and a sinner of God's redeeming, as we say, in our final prayers before death. And God took him as a lamb of his flock, as a sheep of his fold, as a sinner of His redeeming.

And so in that moment in which I had the incredible privilege of communicating to John, the voice of the good shepherd, and realizing in my mind that John had no doubt said those same words to so many people, and knowing that I could not do it without Michelle's help, well that gave me an insight into the fact that the voice of Jesus, which calls each of us by name, each of us is called to repeat an echo and magnify that voice of Christ to others.

So you and I are called to be the voice of Christ in each other's life. You and I are called to step in to be the hands and feet of Christ in this world. You and I are called to make the connections that need to be made. I was the voice, but Michelle was the gate. She held the phone and made it possible for John to say his prayers and to go to his God.

In what ways is Christ speaking to you today? In what ways can you step into the grace of Jesus Christ, which is infinite and carry it forth in your world? No matter how constrained, there's always connections to make. In what ways can you lift somebody up and tell them that they are understood by God and loved through and through.

Amen.