**Sermon for the 4th Sunday of Easter.**

**Readings: John 10:10 and Acts 2: 42-end.**

The bible often describes the number forty as being of significance. As I compose this sermon, we are 40 days into our national lockdown; and my goodness, it feels like an AWFULLY long time!

Our two readings today are concerned with the defining of boundaries.

**The passage from Acts 2** describes how the early church conducted itself. People met outside normal worship settings and in their homes. In a radical departure from very formalised religion, new Christian believers shared common resources. The churches were less about hierarchy and more focussed upon fellowship. We are told that people took time to listen to and learn from the apostles; they made time to praise God for his goodness and were open to the joys of a life changed by a living relationship with the risen Christ.

I can see many parallels here between the early churches in the book of Acts and how churches have responded to the current Coronavirus crisis. For example, through the work of foodbanks and refuges, and the networks of people volunteering to support others by delivering goods and services or befriending others. We are ‘doing’ church in new and exciting ways. Many parishes are noticing how their online services are much better attended than normal. Church is spreading beyond its buildings and into a whole new mission field. With more time to read, study, pray and walk out in nature, many of us with faith are finding we are praising God afresh. The Holy Spirit is moving strongly in this land it seems!

**The reading from John 10** is focussed on the work of shepherds and the protection of the sheepfold. For the last 40 days many of us have been in a metaphoric sheepfold, seeking a haven at home or only leaving it with the length of a shepherd’s crook between us and the rest of the flock! In the middle of a deadly pandemic, the need for protection from the darker forces of the world has been in sharp focus. Whilst on the one hand we are told that we are past the peak of the epidemic in this country, on the other we are also told how we are still very much at risk. It seems that the pathway to normal life is as rocky and uncertain as that navigated by first century shepherds. As we await guidance from global and national leaders about our future safety and conduct, we find that there are contrasting voices about where we go from here. To borrow imagery from Psalm 23, there are many competing ideas about how we might navigate our way to the still waters and green pastures and away from the valley of the shadow of a Covid-19-induced death.

So, what might the **‘life in all its fullness’** offered by Jesus in John’s Gospel look like for us going forward? Whilst there is much uncertainty, what does seem clear is that our lives will be never be quite the same again.

I hope that our **time boundaries will be different.** Many of us used to define our lives through busyness and the completion of diarised tasks. However, enforced downtime has provided an unexpected opportunity for us to consider how our working lives might function in the future. For those of us who like to plan, these forty days have been a timely reminder of the value of being in the moment. In the future, I wonder how much we might all benefit from resting more in God’s time and not our own tightly controlled schedules. Jesus modelled for us the benefit of taking time to be alongside people, listening carefully to their needs and tending to others before himself.

Hopefully, our **social boundaries will also be more inclusive**. In our reading from John, when Jesus declares that he is “very truly…a gate for the sheep;” he is acknowledging that many past religious and political practices worked to elevate a few pious people to the detriment of many. For too long legalistic practice meant that compassion for others was lost. John’s Gospel reminds us that Jesus is the true shepherd. He knows us by name, knows what is best for us and invites us to share in a fullness of life that only he can offer. So, what might a future life in all its fullness look like? I am praying for three sets of changes.

**Firstly, that we will value more people as Christ himself does.** It is interesting how in recent weeks we have learned the value of those jobs that are traditionally low paid or of low status. When we ‘clap for key workers’ we are increasingly reminded of the role that humbler occupations play in the smooth running of our lives. Never have we appreciated cleaners, carers and farm workers more than we do now.

**Secondly, I pray that there will be a new covenant between those that work and those that reward them.** Our thanks towards NHS staff has been expressed artistically as a series of rainbows. In Genesis, the rainbow which appeared after the Great Flood was a sign of a new covenant between Mankind and God. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if these rainbows marked a new covenant of gratitude towards those whose working lives (in and out of the NHS) that were previously unappreciated? Let us all value the generous self -sacrifice of those who give of themselves for a greater good as part of their normal life.

**Thirdly, I pray that we will see our lives much more in God’s time.** The slower pace of recent weeks has enabled us to see beauty in creation. Where I live, the dominant soundscape has been birdsong and the blossoming plants have seemed glorious. Going forward I pray that we always stop to notice the seasons as we have been able to of late.

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We have reached a stage in this crisis where most of know someone whose life has been cut short by the pandemic. Coming face to face with so much fear and death has been a timely reminder that we need to grab the life we have with both hands and not wait to tell one another how much we love them or express praise to God for all his gifts.

It seems that the time in our domestic sheepfolds will be continuing for a while longer. As Christians we can be grateful that we shelter behind the ultimate Good Shepherd.

May we be ready to trust in him alone to lead us and all those we love to safety in the weeks ahead.

May we ask this in Jesus’ name,

Amen.