John 10.11-18 p. 88
1 John 3.16-18 p. 214
21st April 2024 **Love is…**

*Gracious God, we open the bible and long to receive your word.
Open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word
 with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.*Perhaps you remember the *Love Is...* comic strip created by New Zealand cartoonist Kim Casali in the 1960s. The cartoons originated from a series of love notes that she drew for her future husband, Roberto Casali. For a time they were very popular as greetings cards or in newspapers. The cute drawings were accompanied by phrases like: *Love is…when he likes the grey in your hair.* That sort of thing!Well, the two readings set for today, one from John’s gospel, the other from the epistle of John are connected by one idea; that the love of God is shown in the self-giving life and death of Jesus

Our gospel reading begins with words which have become very dear to Christians as Jesus says: *I am the Good Shepherd.*Even townies like me appreciate how hard working and selfless shepherds can be.

Just after Lockdown one of our first holidays was up in the Lake District on a sheep farm, one given over to the National Trust by Beatrix Potter. We were greeted by the farmer, who lived next to the rental cottage, a born and bred Cumbrian lady and she asked us where we came from. ‘Amersham’ we said, ‘near London. We were somewhat deluded if we ever thought that might have impressed her, because she replied, *Ah yes, went down south once for a wedding. Didn’t like it. Never went again!*Well, we may not have agreed with her about that, but you know as we watched her throughout the week, watched her care for the flock, her unbounded energy day after day, and her obvious joy at looking after her sheep, we became somewhat in awe of her dedication and impressive work ethic. In just about every way that counted our host knew her sheep, and they knew her.

To be honest, as a townie, I might not always totally get some of the *I AM* sayings straight away because they are, understandably considering Jesus’ audience, aimed at an agricultural community: *I am the vine, you are the branches…I am the gate…*
Perhaps us urban dwellers could come up with alternatives. What would it mean if we thought of The Lord Jesus Christ as saying: I am ...the wise teacher, the scrupulous banker, the compassionate care worker or the inclusive, non-partisan politician?

Yet, on what is sometimes called *Good Shepherd* Sunday, with the example of our Cumbrian host in the forefront of my mind, I sense there is something very special about this saying.

But let’s not run away with too much romance here. For those listening to Jesus knew only too well that there were two sorts of shepherds. One, who owned the flock and would do anything for the sheep’s safety. The other was a hired hand, perhaps just temporarily looking after the sheep, whose heart just wasn’t in it and who cared little for the flock in his control.

So, probably just about everyone knew of bad shepherds as well as good ones and Jesus uses that idea. He uses it to make a distinction between types of religious leaders and preachers.

There was, and we might argue still is, a collision of ideas about what constitutes faith. The gospels collectively would argue that the ‘bad’ shepherds emphasise ritual and rule keeping, for them tradition is rigid and often there is no room for new discoveries or even basic expressions of compassion. The ‘good’ shepherd, on the other hand, is not overly concerned about rule keeping for its own sake; his care somehow is deeper than just looking on a person’s outer life.

Now, let’s be clear, Jesus wasn’t the first, so called, ‘Good’ Shepherd! For it was a common metaphor used to describe heroes in Israel’s past – great leaders like Moses, prophets like Elijah and of course, and most obviously, great kings like the shepherd boy turned sovereign David.

And it was also part of the Jewish Scripture’s way of describing God. Not only is there Psalm 23 but we also have words like these from Ezekiel 34: *As a shepherd goes in search of his sheep when his flock is scattered from him, so I shall go and search for my sheep says the Lord.*
So there was something deeply wholesome and inspiring associated with the idea of leadership in the ancient world based on shepherding. It was engaged leadership expressed through practical and supportive pastoral care.

There was, the commentators tell us, an assumption in the ancient world that government was caring and that both the character of God and Kings could be thought of in terms of a good shepherd. It would be interesting, yet perhaps little unfair, to ask the candidates in the upcoming General Election, whenever that may be called, if any of them ever thought being a Good Shepherd would be an appropriate role model for political leadership these days?

Now today’s gospel passage ends by taking the idea of a Good Shepherd from a tranquil rural idyll to a much deeper and more challenging place.

Jesus says he is willing to lay down his life for the sheep.

It’s in John’s gospel that Jesus walks towards the cross with the most resolute of footsteps. He accepts that inevitable part of his humanity – he will die. He accepts it and, after prayer and soul searching, embraces it. It’s a process that will eventually lead towards the mystery and hope we call resurrection.

The cross points us to a God who gives, who gives himself for us with breath taking generosity and inspirational grace.

And every time someone puts their own interests last, loses their ego and instead offers to serve us with love, grace and generosity of spirit something of the Good Shepherd of the gospels lives on in the flock.

And this idea of generous, self-giving love is the segway that joins together our readings from gospel and epistle today.

By the time John’s letter reaches its readers the life of Jesus is already two generations in the past. Eyewitnesses had, or were, passing away which meant that the collective memory was beginning to fade. 1 John chapter 3 seeks to stir that fire and let the flames dance again.

Most movements, in about two generations, morph into institutions, some bearing little resemblance to the original dreams of their founders.

So, in the context of chapter two and so many people leaving the church over disputes surrounding the identity of Jesus, John attempts in chapter three to place the cross as a central and defining moment in the story of Jesus.

The message of the cross here in the Epistle of John is not, essentially, one of atonement. Instead, it becomes the ultimate expression of love over hate.

Jesus choose to live that way – he choose the way of love and rejected the pathway of hate.

We are back to Kim Casali’s cartoons – *Love is..*

This is Love’s Story, says John. It defines Jesus as it can also define us. It’s as if he is saying: Don’t let the cross fade. Remember it in your worship and honour it in your service.

I love the fact that we can use that word, ‘service’ in two ways. When we come together to sing and pray, we call it a service. And then, when we leave, going out to show loving kindness in action, we too call that service. It’s as if there really is no dividing line between the two, one is an extension, a manifestation of the other. What we sing about in church is what we care about out in the world.

So, John says, in what must surely be one of the key verses in the letter: *This is how we know what love is: Christ gave his life for us.* But, of course, he doesn’t stop there and goes on: *And we, in turn, must give our lives for our fellow Christians.*Now, perhaps to a modern ear that sounds a little inward looking. Is he only advocating we be generous to fellow church members? Well, although he is specifically talking about that, he isn’t, by the same token, saying such loving is exclusively reserved for the Church. After all, wouldn’t that be a contradiction of that well known verse of his from the gospel about God loving the world so much?

Yet, as one commentator I read pointed out. It’s often easier to love those ‘far away’, than really love those close at hand.

The test, the real down to earth test, for the readers of John’s letter was loving the people next to them in church. And it still can be a challenge for us today – and at this point in the sermon I advise you not to look around you!

In all this John doesn’t appeal to vague principles or abstract theories. Instead, he quotes a real story and the lived experience of Jesus. For His story is Love’s Story and it needs to become ours too.

Today we’ve looked at passages from a gospel and a letter named after John. Yet it’s more than a name that links them but a central idea.

The idea is sometimes expressed through words. Words about love and self-giving.

The idea is often expressed in a symbol. The cross.

So may the love of God, expressed in the life and death of Jesus be our constant inspiration as we seek to love one another.

May it be so in the name of our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainor. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 19th April 2024*