
Hymns:	314	“Christ whose glory fills the skies”
	296	“Christ has risen”
	480	“The Lord’s my Shepherd, I’ll not want”

Reading: John 10:1-11

“THE GOOD SHEPHERD”

Every morning, as I awake, I watch the second hand of my watch move steadily round to the figure 12. I put the radio on precisely as the Greenwich pips have gone back into their box. I can’t stand their punctuation, machine-gun drill, their staccato sharpness. It’s too much at six o’clock in the morning.

And so, as today began, I did what I always do. I put on the radio expecting the news; I thought I’d hear about the grimy happenings and the dreary doings of a distempered world:

- the election (and hacking) going on in France;
- the freeing of some of the kidnapped girls in Nigeria;
- the latest wave of refugees crossing the Mediterranean;
- murders, knifings, accidents, disasters.

That’s what I expected. The usual sad round. Instead, I got.... silence... nothing... zilch! I thought my radio had given up the ghost. I resolved to buy a new one. But then, suddenly, someone spoke out of the ether. The radio was working after all. The voice informed us that today is (wait for it) International Dawn Chorus Day. A bunch of writers, environmentalists, ornithologists and their trains had been broadcasting the Dawn Chorus since 12.30am!!!!!! Six hours devoted to barely audible chirpings, coo-ings, trillings, hootings and croakings from warblers and egrets, avocets and wood pigeons, chaffinches and all the company of heaven. This marathon was coming to us from the wetlands of Somerset – the regions they call “The Levels”.

What I’d thought was silence was really a speckled sheet of sound and, at 6.00am, I was supposed to wonder at its beauty, its radiance, its glory. My deaf ear, pointed toward the radio, picked up none of these subtleties. But I did catch on with the commentary. And I was startled to hear John Milton quoted at length. I could live on John Milton. Indeed, in retirement, I suspect I’ll have him for breakfast, lunch and dinner. He feeds me. So it was fabulous to hear a speech (from Paradise Lost Book 5), a prayer, offered by Adam and Eve in Paradise, at the dawn of the very first day after their creation. Looking out of their dwelling, their bower, just at the moment when the night rolls away and the sun begins to announce the arrival of a gorgeous new dawn, Adam speaks forth:

*Ye mists and exhalations that now rise
From hill or streaming lake, dusky or gray,
Till the sun paint your fleecy skirts with gold,
In honour of the world's great Author, rise!*

*Join voice, all ye living souls. Ye birds
That, singing, up to Heaven-gate ascend,
Beat on your wings and in your notes his praise.*

*Hail, universal Lord! Be bounteous still
To give us only good; and if the night
Have gathered aught of evil, or concealed,
Disperse it, as the light dispels the dark.*

Well that's how I woke up this morning. And it got me thinking. As I pursued my bathroom routine, I thought about that default position in our brains which, when we are faced by tribulations, when the horrors of the world darken our souls and fill us with fear, we slip into an idealised alternative order. We think of lovely times, we get drunk, we go into denial. As a boy, whenever I had toothache, I used to concentrate fiercely on a different part of my mouth from the place where the pain originated. Naturally, I hoped that I could think my way beyond the ache and the pain. But such strategies won't do for long. We can persuade ourselves up to a point just by looking the other way. But it will come home to haunt us again eventually.

When the birds had finished tweeting, twittering, instagraming, texting and netflixing, when homage to International Dawn Chorus Day was done, on came the seven o'clock news. And now the tones were only too predictable.

- there was Mr Corbyn with his tax plans;
- and Mrs May with her promise of strong and stable government;
- Monsieur Macron with his hacked emails;
- President Trump with his threat to back out of the Paris Global Warming Agreement.

The world, the bewildering cacophonies of dysfunctionality, remain. No amount of birdsong can hide or disguise them. And we must face them honestly, openly, bravely.

So, at last, I come to the subject of the day. When Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd, he did so in contra-distinction to false shepherds, the mercenaries, those who had no heart for looking after the sheep, the money-grabbers and the carpet-baggers, - in a word, the fakes and the quacks who, far from caring for the sheep, actually bring them into danger. For when the wolf threatens, the paid hireling runs for his life. The Good Shepherd, on the other hand, sticks to his task; he protects his sheep, he stands between them and their would-be predators.

In other words, the Good Shepherd is a good shepherd. Precisely because he does his shepherding in the real world, the world where greed and heartlessness, ruthlessness and cruelty reign. No escapism, no fantasy alternative universe, for him. No birdsong to cover the news. No escape to the countryside to avoid the

hurly-burly of the real world, no imagined Utopia, no rural bliss. For him, he must be a Good Shepherd in the midst of grimy reality. His word (matched by his action) is simple, "I'll look after you even when things are at their toughest, their darkest, their most fearful." This is the Good Shepherd. A source of comfort and strength, consolation and inspiration, even in the most threatening of times.

What's more, this Good Shepherd knows his sheep. He knows them by name! Sheep at the stupidest creatures on earth – their daft faces all look alike, they are too often mutinous muttons who flock together even when that puts their lives in danger. "Twp" – that's the simple word I remember growing up as a lad in country that had more sheep than people. I'd urge you not to be put off in this lambing season by the playful gambolling of lambs in our sweet especial country fields. "The child is father of the man", said William Wordsworth. Equally, the lamb is parent of the silly ewe or the dithering ram. Yet the Good Shepherd knows his sheep. Indeed he knows them by name. Astonishing!

Again, situate that understanding of the ministry of Jesus in today's distressing world where we hear, again and again, tales of alienation and disenfranchisement, marginalisation and crippling poverty, uselessness and victimisation. People are voting to overthrow the established order in the West, accusing it of having passed them by and being deaf to their groaning and blind to their need. And we note too the radicalisation of Muslims for one or another Islamist extremist group. And again in the haunted faces of those taking to the seas in desperate attempts to find a better life elsewhere. Or else sunk into utter despair in refugee camps or starving villages of fratricidal war.

The Good Shepherd knows his sheep and is ready to die for them. This is not a suicide mission but a mission of mercy. "Your lives are so precious to me," he seems to say, "that I value them greater than mine." The Good Shepherd lay down his life for his sheep. Suicide bombers lay down their lives for their own understanding of paradise. In the case of Jesus it was for the wellbeing of humanity in its entirety.

This message cannot be sanitised by birdsong, it's a message for our time. It may be International Dawn Chorus Day but it's also, definitely, the Lord's appointed day, the acceptable day of the Lord, when he comes to us as Shepherd of our souls, our sustainer, our hope, our Saviour. Into the real world, where tears are at the heart of things, he invites us now and here, today at this very moment, to hitch our wagons to his star, to follow him who knows us and protects us and has died and been raised for us. He offers an open invitation. "Come", he beckons.

Kido (our lay worker, our colleague) is currently in South Korea. In a few weeks he'll move into his first job as a trainee Methodist Minister. The training period will lead, in two years time, to a great service of ordination, when he'll become fully-fledged as a member of the cloth.

As a former President of the Conference I've had the privilege several times of presiding at ordination services. I know how to do it and I love doing it too. But there's one place where, inevitably, my voice cracks. Towards the close of the service I address a charge to the ordinands and I feel myself challenged by the words I'm speaking to them. This is what I came into the ministry for. It runs thus:

Remember your call.

*Declare the Good News.
Celebrate the Sacraments.
Serve the needy.
Minister to the sick.
Welcome the stranger.
Seek the lost.*

*Be shepherds of the flock of Christ.
As you exercise mercy, don not forget justice;
As you minister discipline, do not forget mercy;
That when Christ the Chief Shepherd comes in glory,
He may count you among his faithful servants.*

So Methodist ministers are to be shepherds of their flock in imitation of the saving love of the Good Shepherd himself. And it that's so for those of us who are ordained, why shouldn't it be so for all of us who believe? In the ordination service, after those words have been spoken, the congregation responds:

To God be the glory for ever.

To which I can only say now as I do on all such occasions: Amen.