

## The Fourth Sunday of Easter: The Shepherd and the Stone

**Readings: Acts 4:5-12; John 10:11-18**

Not all shepherds are good shepherds. You can have bad shepherds, just as you can have bad plumbers or bad priests. What makes the shepherd good is the degree of care that he or she shows for the sheep. And more, says Jesus, the degree of knowledge: 'I know my own, and my own know me'. More still, *the lengths* the shepherd goes to protect the flock: 'the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep'.

So if – as this image assumes – we his followers belong to the flock of Jesus, then we need not fear the shepherd. He won't just leave us on the hillside to fend for ourselves, or get a dog to bark commands at us. The good shepherd is *the compassionate one*, the one who gives his life for us.

Yet we've also just heard St Peter talking about Jesus to the rulers and priests who'd arrested him. And he speaks a very different language. Jesus is not the compassionate shepherd but 'the stone that was rejected ... and has become the cornerstone'. A stone ... stern, unmovable, hardly capable of care and compassion, surely?

But think again of Jesus. How this compassionate, self-giving shepherd is also utterly determined, utterly faithful, utterly unmovable from the path he is given by the Father; and, as a consequence, how many enemies he makes. To them, and to us, Jesus is a *challenge*, even an offence. He himself spoke of stones as 'stumbling-blocks' – the Greek word is *skandala*, 'scandals' – stones that trip people up in the name of God. And when he gives Simon the new name Peter ('the Rock'), it is perhaps this scandalous, recalcitrant firmness that he's valuing.

Jesus the shepherd; Jesus the stone. Last week the archdeacon drew our attention to the risen Christ asking his friends to look at his hands and his feet; and then she invited us to consider what *our own* hands and feet say about us. In this fourth week of Easter, and especially on this day of our annual church meeting, we could ask a similar question of ourselves arising from this morning's images. It is this ...

If, as we affirm here, we are the Body of Christ, and called to live his life here in Devizes, then how faithful, how effective are we as good *shepherds* – ready to spend ourselves in compassion, truly knowing and loving those around us? But equally, how faithful, how effective are we as living *stones* – ready to challenge, never shying from the truth, however hard or offensive that is?

May Christ the Good Shepherd, Christ the Cornerstone, bless us in our calling here; shape us into stones in his holy temple, sheep in his joyful flock. Amen.

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