

Revd Michael Burns  
Christ Church West Wimbledon  
Sermon :  
April 22, 2018 ~ “The Fourth Sunday of Easter”

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I once worked in a parish in which the team were involved in all sorts of different projects. Every term we used to meet with our team consultant to review how things were going. He often asked us to do a piece of preparation before the meetings: to write down one thing which worried or concerned us and two things that were going well and for which we wanted to say thank you for. It was a subtle but brilliant way of affirming us in our work. It was refreshing to spend twice as long on the positives rather than dwell on the negatives.

Every year a Church has to hold its Annual Parochial Church Meetings. The clear deadline is April 30 and everything has to be in place by then – reports, finances, nominations for elections and so on. It is quite a tall order to have to think back over the past year and remember everything that has happened – the positive and the negative – which needs to be reported to the whole congregation. But it is good to be able to step back and look at the whole year – and for me that is especially appropriate as I complete my first year here. How has it all gone? What has been good? What has been less good? Stepping back is important – unless you are on the edge of a cliff, of course. An artist painting a picture will often step back to look at how the whole picture is going. A gardener will certainly do the same. It is important to do this – because we are often so wrapped up in the minute detail of what we are engaged in that we fail to look up and see the bigger picture.

Last Wednesday morning I attended a slightly fraught meeting of clergy when we were reflecting on the thorny issue of those congregations from amongst the evangelical wing of the Church of England which don't, amongst other things, welcome the ministry of women. It was a bit tense. Then I went home and there waiting in my inbox was a pdf file from the Diocese called 'Obligations and Legalities'—a guide for the clergy. All 273 pages of it. It made

me ponder again why I had wanted to be ordained and what church had I joined – and then I went out and did four pastoral visits and I remembered why: it was because I simply wanted to be a follower of Jesus, a pastor, to be part of his one flock – and that is what matters.

Jesus, in today's Gospel reading, talks to the disciples about sheep. The shepherd's care for his sheep is a frequent theme in the Gospels and certainly the example would have been a very familiar image to those listening to Jesus.

Jesus has compassion for the crowds who are like sheep without a shepherd. In John 10, the shepherd does not seek what is lost but keeps his sheep safe from all dangers – even being willing to give his life for them. Today's Gospel shows us a God who is not out to get us, to steal from us or put us down. He is not in the business of destructive behaviour; he does not want to wear us down with guilt or demand of us more than we can possibly give. Of course for some, the Church does sometimes give that impression and sends the sheep racing away in alarm. But the image Jesus clearly favours is of a shepherd. He cares for each one of us as the shepherd really knows his sheep and they can feel safe in his care – as today we can feel safe in his care.

The shepherd is clearly someone whom the sheep sense can trust, and who will only use his power to provide wisely and faithfully for those in his care. In that care, they are free to come and go, living out lives doing what sheep do without panic or confusion.

What does this all mean for us? We are so much like sheep in a way – we can easily panic and scatter. Sometimes it is the smallest thing which can knock us off course. We desperately need the Good Shepherd to give us stability and certainty. Today we celebrate together all that Christ Church has been, is and could be in what lies ahead.

And as we reflect upon the past year and look forward to the next, we say: “For all that has been, thanks. For all that is to come, yes!” And we can say that with confidence because we know that God, through Jesus, cares for us like the Good Shepherd. Amen.