

Easter 4 (2024)

Well, no surprises that this day is known as 'Good Shepherd Sunday'!

The Bible is full of sheep references and our reaction to them are often sentimental – images come to mind of comfort and cosiness – and for Shepherds: nurture, kindness, and clear, strong leadership.

On my recent very wet excursion to Cumbria, I saw so many lambs huddled up by stone walls, and couldn't help thinking how hard farmers have to work in increasingly harsh climate conditions. They are rarely mentioned in our prayers, but that's my sermon really. A 'vocational life' often goes under the radar; it is so often hidden or taken for granted in a society which still undervalues service to and for others – teaching, nursing, social work, work with prisoners or the mentally ill, even priestly and chaplaincy work.

Our own Diocese is not alone in taking today's theme and commending the huge range of different ministries within the life and witness of our local churches. Here's the latest booklet for you:

"God Calling" – with true stories of people like you and me, called to serve God and others in the name of Christ. Have you thought of being an Elder, a Licensed Youth Minister, or a Children's and Families' Minister? St John's Church have recently decided to advertise and properly pay for two of the latter which is a considerable commitment. It may well be an answer to prayer to plant and grow a 'younger Church.'

There are other different stories here of being called to be a Churchwarden or a PCC Secretary, or being a Reader or School Foundation Governor...

And yes, of course, not everything you already volunteer to do, necessarily has a particular 'title' or 'job description'. Our shared, principal vocation is the calling to be Christian disciples, caring for our flock, and being guided and led to use our gifts in different ways, different directions. Instead of a hierarchy, or meritocracy, the

Christian Church teaches us a different way of governing or, I would prefer to say, 'shepherding'. Christ, the Good Shepherd, is the best role model we have to teach us whom we serve, and how to serve as faithfully as we possibly can. God really does do the calling when we do the listening, responding, and living out, that chosen vocation. We are not forced to do anything at all but we are always encouraged to listen to that still, small voice calling us and encouraging us to love, serve, and follow the One who gives us life and who gives us strength and every inspiration.

Here's one quotation from the booklet: "I never imagined in my youth being where I am today. God is full of surprises and full of answers to life's difficulties and mysteries, but, of course I'm still asking lots of questions as there is always so much more to learn."

And here's another testimony if you like: "My journey of faith, like many others, hasn't been a straight path, but all the loops and backs and forths have made me who I am. I love speaking about faith with people – but I do 'read the room' first! If people can see that I am a genuine, caring, open person then they are much more likely to trust and open up to me when they feel they want to."

I commend the booklet to you. It really isn't about self-promotion as I initially thought. It is about trying to articulate the sheer variety of pathways for service in our Diocese and indeed, her flourishing. But I come back to the everyday hard work and commitment of the Cumbrian shepherd, or the Suffolk shepherdess who, come rain or shine, is out there with their sheep – feeding them and sheltering them, leading them to fresh pastures and still waters, as today's Psalm 23 promises. This Easter-tide, when we focus on the life of the Resurrection, the Gospel vignettes and pointers, all tell the same good news: that God's calling us to serve Him is the source of perfect freedom and is both a privilege and a joy. We cannot and dare not 'hang up' on that call.

