

EASTER 4

‘Merciful Father, you gave your Son Jesus Christ to be the good shepherd, and in his love for us to lay down his life and rise again: keep us always under his protection, and give us grace to follow in his steps; through Jesus Christ our Lord.’ Amen.

I want to begin with two true stories which have nothing in common, or, do they? The first was recently quoted in *The Times* from ‘Le Figaro’ about Sister André, a French nun aged 118, who last week became the world’s oldest known living person. She said: “The good Lord is late. I have the feeling he has forgotten me.”

The second story was from last summer when I was asked to lead the Leavers’ service in Woodbridge school chapel. Imagine my surprise when all the 6th formers concerned came dressed up with wigs on and gowns, or wearing stethoscopes around their necks and wearing white coats, you name it – the respectable professions they were hoping to follow or become. They were ‘dressed to impress’ but I wish I had been briefed beforehand! I couldn’t see any dog collars, or car mechanics or engineers, but I may be imagining that! My talk was really about David Hockney so I said that if I had known, I would have come dressed as an artist, well, as David really, because I consider him (rightly or wrongly) to be our greatest living artist - who also seems to smoke as much and as passionately as Maggi Hambling, but I digress.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, which in recent years has become ‘themed’ as ‘Vocations Sunday’ perhaps it is good to ponder, whatever our age, the gifts and encouragement and vision for the future which God is still hoping to shape in us. Of course, if I was speaking this morning to an Anglican ‘Vocations’ conference, I would tailor my thoughts around the ups and downs of being called to the ordained ministry in particular. I would perhaps focus on the vision first, the varieties of service and ways of living and serving

sacramentally and sacrificially. I would have to mention also that like a shepherd's life, however faithful and loving you are to your sheep, you will lose some along the way, you will fail them, and you will see them die even. And despite all the modern business and management speak around contemporary priesthood and collegiality (imagine if you had to care for 13 churches somehow), the calling to lead your sheep in all weathers in often unsociable hours, that dedicated ministry can be lonely too, as well as frustrating.

But that isn't my conversation with you this morning. It is to say that despite Sister André's impatience to join the angelic host, we must give thanks for the most important ingredient of every vocation amongst so many, which began at our own baptism. We may have been screaming or fast asleep all those years ago. Our Christian journeying though is to believe and know for ourselves - The good Lord has **not** forgotten us! We are each called by name and anointed.

As you can read in Bishop Mike's paper, the Lord prods us from time to time to discover more about ourselves and how we can serve him anew. Or how we can change direction. Or how we can adapt and learn new skills, or how we can take up new leisure or social, or educational interests which in our working lives we never had the proper time to explore or enjoy. These are important conversations to have with a spiritual partner or friend or guide – I would prefer that to being sent on a retirement course, for example.

I do believe God speak to us especially when we listen and wait upon Him. I think of the maths teacher who recently felt he had to leave home in the UK temporarily behind, to offer help to drive some Ukrainian refugees from danger to safety – and he said to the camera and the world, 'I have never felt so scared in all my life.' But he is there, as I speak, where he needs to be, and is just one example of how a single person's compassion can be a source of inspiration and wonder – not unlike the apostle, Peter's experience with Dorcas in

Joppa. Christian action so often thrives when we accept our vocation prayerfully, in good faith certainly, but how much more so, when we continue to be challenged by what and how God may be asking of us today to follow, or complete, or change. How God may be asking us to build up and grow with our hands-on assent, willingness and participation...

How we would like to know what kind of conversations St Peter had with Simon, the tanner, or how they shared that sense of fear and joy which every vocation touches upon when eyes are opened and lives renewed. But the good news remains that you and I can have those conversations today which, instead of talking about the weather, probe that deeper, inner journey to make the same connection or confession, as the Psalmist before us:

‘The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want...

He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his name’s sake...

You are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me.’

Amen. Alleluia!