

## Readings for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

26<sup>th</sup> April 2026

### First Reading: Acts 2:42-47

Many were baptised and were added to the community. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

### Second Reading: 1 Peter 2:19-25

Brothers and sisters: It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

### Gospel: St John 10:1-10

Jesus said to the Pharisees: 'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

## A Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

As you may know (or may remember when I remind you!), one of the names by which the fourth Sunday of Easter is known is 'Good Shepherd Sunday'. On this Sunday each year, our Gospel reading comes from John chapter 10 – a different section of the chapter each year – in which Jesus utters the well-known words: 'I am the Good Shepherd'. This year, our Gospel reading stops just short of this key phrase, but we are familiar with the idea of how the image of the shepherd who guides and cares for his sheep is a metaphor for God's guidance and care for those who follow him.

On this Sunday, we often focus on the Good Shepherd, on how Jesus guides and cares for us – how he shepherds us, but today I would like to think about it a little differently. A shepherd requires sheep. We perhaps take it for granted that we are part of God's flock, and I hope we do include ourselves. But what is our role as the sheep of God's flock? I am sure it should not simply be passive.

This idea of shepherd and sheep also links to the very end of John's Gospel where Jesus meets some of the disciples, the fishermen, on the beach after the resurrection, and redeems Peter. Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loves him, once for each of the times that Peter denied him on Good Friday. Each time Peter affirms that he does indeed love Jesus, and Jesus responds with 'Feed my lambs', then 'Tend my sheep', and finally 'Feed my sheep'. It is Peter's calling to be a shepherd of God's people himself, and to be a leader of the infant church. It gives rise to another name for this Sunday: 'Vocations Sunday'.

So it gives rise to a question for us: how do we live out our vocation, our calling, as the sheep of God's flock guided by and cared for by Jesus?

This week I had the immense privilege of being part of a clergy visit to RAF Lossiemouth. We were there to learn about the work of chaplaincy, but we also heard about the wide range of operations based there, had a tour of the site, an opportunity to speak with serving frontline personnel and also the chance to get up close and personal with a Typhoon!

When we consider the purpose of our armed forces, it is clear that good teamwork is absolutely essential. This is not simply a case of following orders but of recognition of how each person's part contributes to the whole. It also doesn't take too much imagination to recognise that one stray sheep doing its own thing has the potential to cause enormous harm to many others. In many organisations, teamwork is generally focussed on a group of people working together. What was described to us at RAF Lossiemouth was a team ethos that intentionally not only encompasses all the personnel, military and civilian, serving on the base, but also their families, the wider community in Moray, their contractors and sub-contractors, indeed anyone who seems to come into contact with them. The strapline 'Team Lossie' was everywhere, with the idea that it underpins all that they do. Within this comes the work of the chaplains and all the allied support services, concerned not only with the spiritual wellbeing of service personnel, but also embedded into care for their more general wellbeing and, as with everything, extending to their families and the wider community.

The presentation was excellent, although I am sure this system is not perfect. As part of our visit, we discussed some of the times when support fails and tragedy ensues, as well as how they care for people with the more obvious tragedies that military service can entail. Nevertheless, the aspiration was inspiring and the enthusiasm evident.

By this stage, you may be wondering how this relates to my earlier question, how do we live out our calling as the sheep of God's flock. You, like me, may have thought that chaplaincy in the armed forces was largely inward-focused and quite different from being church in a local community. In reality, I found to be refreshingly outward-looking, perhaps more so than is sometimes the case with local churches. It is an example of how to be God's flock.

Being described as sheep is not often regarded as a compliment. Apparently even the Romans used sheep as a comparison for people who were easily fooled. And yet it is a metaphor that Jesus used for God's people, as did the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures and other parts of the New Testament. Human beings are social creatures, as are sheep; we operate best together rather than individually. As humans, we often like to follow others, and we can learn to recognise and trust leaders. But we also know that it matters deeply who we choose to follow.

Today's readings all have something to teach us about our identity as sheep. From our Gospel passage, we know that sheep exist in relation to the shepherd and to the rest of the flock. As Christians, we recognise that God is the shepherd whom we choose to follow. This passage also reminds us that God is the gatekeeper: it is not the role of the sheep to choose who is in and who is out of God's sheepfold. The sheep are called to trust that God will lead us in rights paths, paths that, we are told, lead to abundant life, even if those paths don't look the way we imagine they should. As the passage from 1 Peter illustrates, God's paths of love and justice can bring discomfort, pain and even unjust suffering. God's paths don't always make sense to our eyes.

The reading from Acts 2 is an example of a way of living, embraced by the early church, which is maybe another thing that doesn't make sense to us ... or perhaps we don't want it to! It demonstrates that God's flock is mutually dependent. These early Christians shared everything, and supported one another's wellbeing in teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers, even if it seems a counter-intuitive way of living in our prevailing culture of self-fulfilment and individualism, of me and mine first.

This may be starting to look somewhat inward-looking, rather church-focused, but further on in John 10, Jesus says 'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also.' Whatever, we understand by this, the last verse of the Acts passage today reminds us that the church exists within a wider community and world. We are told that this Christian community had 'the goodwill of all the people' and that 'day by day the Lord added to their number'.

Within this approach, I see something akin to the 'Team Lossie' idea of mutual support for the whole community in its widest understanding.

How do we live out our vocation as the sheep of God's flock? We, as sheep, do not exist in isolation as individuals, or as one congregation, or even as a larger denomination of the church. We are part of the church worldwide and our calling is to serve the whole earth. We follow the teachings and example of Christ in order that we may build each other up, and that's vitally important, so that we may then share God's love, justice, peace and hope with all the world.