

This is sermon number 7 in our series as we travel through the epistle of James. As Angela and I have said on a number of occasions, this book of the bible differs from most others in the New Testament because it is not teaching us what we need to know so that we can become Christians, but it is teaching us how we should live as Christians. But in preparing for the midweek bible studies this week, and for this sermon, what became very clear to me was that we must learn from James, in the context of everything else the bible teaches us. James contains a lot of important lessons for us, but if we are not careful these lessons can feel a bit relentless, and can make us feel as if we are getting everything wrong.

So far James has told us to be strong and remain faithful, to make sure we listen to the right things in life, the importance of generosity, how faith without good deeds is dead, how we should keep control of our tongues, and how true wisdom comes from God so we must avoid jealousy and selfish ambition. This week we are being taught about not arguing with our fellow Christians, how we need to move closer to God, how we must resist the devil, and how we must avoid becoming over self confident when we make our plans despite what God wants those plans to be.

Now don't get me wrong – this is all vital teaching, and is all part of why I love the book of James – but today, I don't want to focus on the teaching about how to be a good Christian – I want to focus on the benefits of being a Good Christian. And sometimes life can get in the way of recognising those benefits.

The last few months in the 4 churches, our lives seem to have been dominated by people being very ill, and people dying – and this weekend is in a period that has typified that. Last week we had the funeral of Peter Hall in Fowlmere, and this coming week we have the funeral of Alan Jackson in the same place.

Whilst some of you were at Peter's funeral, I was at the funeral of the Rev'd Anna Matthews in Ely Cathedral, and I will come back to that at the end of this sermon. Now, again, don't get me wrong. I am not in any way complaining about the amount of time our funeral ministry takes up – I have said on several occasions that one of the biggest privileges during my curacy has been the opportunity to be with people as they prepare for a funeral of a loved one, and I will embark on the next one of these opportunities this week with the same sense of privilege that I have had with every other funeral that I have been involved in.

What my concern is, though, is this. When we live our lives, do we really give ourselves, and do we encourage other people, to make the best opportunity that we can do, to joyfully live those lives alongside Jesus? Do we focus enough on how much better life is with Jesus in our lives than it would be without him? Do we sometimes get the balance wrong between the challenges and the benefits of being a Christian? And our two readings this morning absolutely typify the challenges of getting the balance right.

Our gospel reading is one of those amazingly comforting passages that appear throughout, particularly, the gospels which say to me, "Thank you Jesus for being who and what you are".

The actual passage in John's gospel comes in three parts and our gospel reading just covers the first two – but I am going to take us into a third part as well as that is where Jesus explains this whole image of being the Shepherd – the good shepherd.

The first section is Jesus explaining how we as the sheep, in our village, need to, and indeed do, behave in a similar way towards him, as the sheep do towards their gatekeeper. Sheep were an essential part of a family's existence in biblical times – every family would keep a few sheep, quite often in a room on the ground floor of their houses. And they primarily kept them for the wool in order to make clothes. But a family could not afford the cost of a shepherd to look after their sheep so families would group together so that between them they may have a flock of 20 or 30 sheep and a shepherd would look after them. And in the morning, the shepherd would come and open the door, and call the sheep that he was to look after – and the sheep would recognise the sound that the shepherd would make – some would have a distinctive call, some would use a flute playing a specific tune, some, apparently would sing. And apparently all the sheep of the village would congregate in the centre and then each shepherd would go out of the village to a different pasture, calling his sheep, and they would follow. And the image we have to understand is clearly that one of those shepherds represents Jesus – and that is the call, the sound, we must follow.

And then we come to the second section. Now we are out of the village and in the wilderness.

We have no comfortable secure rooms for our sheep – instead the shepherd would have built an enclosure, probably out of rocks, and when night comes and the sheep are to stay out in the wilderness that night, the shepherd would call his sheep into the enclosure, and then physically lie across the entrance, as the gate, to protect his sheep. Just as the shepherd, the gatekeeper, is protecting his sheep from thieves and bandits and wild animals, so Jesus is protecting us. The thief comes only to steal (the sheep) to kill (so they can eat) and destroy (to hide the evidence). Jesus came that we might have life and live it abundantly.

And then to that 3rd section.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep."

Which rather explains the first two sections in the words of Jesus himself when he says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep." How comforting and how reassuring is it to know that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is there loving us and protecting us each and every day?

So how do we behave as good sheep for our good shepherd? Returning to James, I want to focus briefly on one half of one verse, "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you." Or as the New Living Translation puts it, "Come close to God and God will come close to you." Isn't that a comforting thought – that God wants to be close to us. But not only is it a comforting

thought – it should be no surprise. There are times when we think, “Why should God want to be close to me? I’m simply not good enough. I’ve done X or Y that I shouldn’t have done. God won’t come close to me.” If you have thoughts like that then think about the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd doesn’t only look after the best sheep – he looks after all the sheep, whether they are scrawny, whether they are limping, whatever condition they are in, the Good Shepherd looks after them.

But how do we know what it is that are expected to do in our lives? How do we stop worrying that we are not good enough? Well James, at the end of today’s passage explains.

“Look here, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.” How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it’s here a little while, then it’s gone. What you ought to say is, “If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.””

So we ask God what he wants us to do. We pray. We meditate. We talk to other Christians. And we wait until we know in our hearts that what we have decided to do is what God wants us to do. And perhaps we say to God, to be sure, “if this is not what you want me to do – then stop it.”

And what better way can there be to live our lives alongside God. To ask God to guide us with the power of the Holy Spirit, to do what it is that he wants us to do. Remember the words of Psalm 27. “Hear me as I pray O, Lord. Be merciful and answer me! My heart has heard you say, “Come and talk with me.” And my heart responds, “Lord, I am coming.””

But I urge you, more than anything else today, to never believe that God thinks you are not good enough. And think about that often, and let that thought alone bring the smile to your face.

I want to finish today by going back to the funeral service of the Rev’d Anna Matthews. Anna is the reason I am here today – she was the diocesan director of ordinands when I was being considered for training for ordination. It was Anna who sent me away to study more at one point because she didn’t think I was ready – but she didn’t say No. It was Anna who a year later put me forward. At her requiem mass on Wednesday the preacher talked about how we don’t understand why her life ended so shockingly at the age of 44, how Anna was the consummate priest who so many people learned from, and how Anna had done so much to build up the life of St Benet’s in Cambridge.

Whatever the reason for Anna’s death, I came away from that service more determined than ever to show people the joy and happiness that life with Jesus will bring. I want people to know that the Holy Spirit can transform our lives from wherever we feel they have gone to where God wants us to be. That’s what the Good Shepherd wants for us. That is what James teaches us.

On the back of the order of service for Anna’s Requiem Mass an extract from her last sermon was printed, and I’d like to read that to you today.

“Our lives can become new creations when they are opened up to the Holy Spirit of God. What is settled becomes unsettled. Our certainties get shaken as the Spirit of God blows where it wills, upending convention, expectation and habit as it goes. Lepers can be touched. The condemned

are given a future. Hearts shrunk in grief can swell again. Captives can go free. Respectable Pharisees might just become disciples. The dead can live. That's the sort of new life the Holy Spirit will give as it makes of us new creations. The places and things we are so certain are fixed, immutable, just the way things are and the way things have to be - these can unfold through the gentle breath of the Spirit into a newness we'd neither imagined nor expected. Think of Peter on the shore of Lake Tiberias, restored and forgiven by Jesus, freed from the weight of his guilty denial. Think of Mary Magdalene, healed and restored in the company of Jesus, given a community to belong to and a future. Think of all the others in the gospels whose lives are set on a new trajectory by their encounter with Jesus."