

Quick quiz...

Do you know - What is the most popular you tube video of all time is – I mean ever?

Build up the tension and ideas....

The baby shark dance... Pinkfong Kids' songs and stories

Do you know who are the most followed people on Twitter?

Barack Obama – 130 million followed by Justin Bieber 114 million and our very own Richard Evans has 3704 followers...

If we move platforms to instagram? Do you know who has the most followers – Timothy has followers into the hundreds – I have 36 – I clearly am not working hard enough on this social media thingy... so who has the most in the world – who has the biggest international influence?

Cristiano Ronaldo – 276 million followers, Ariana Grande 231 million

And we haven't even gone to the world of tiktok... for the hugely influential silly dances and crazy pet videos ...

If anyone wants to contend any of these statistics – which I have thrown at you...

It was all via my own google search and some were even via Wikipedia – shocking I know - I just took their word for it – My own guidance on this sermon has been through dubious sources of media...

We are clearly hugely influenced through many things – I hope you the right kind of guidance - but also.... Clearly we are deeply influenced (whether we like it or not) through significant media input...

As Christians – we hear what or who guides us in our Gospel reading for today – this passage comes shortly after Jesus has described himself as the Good Shepherd - we hear in this reading that his sheep know him and they follow him.....

I have always been particularly keen on the shepherd image as my surname when I was a child was Crook – for me in my job my name links me to a nice pastoral image – I'm not sure my sister Amanda was as keen because when she became an accountant being A. Crook was a little dubious...

For me the Crook is an important image so much so that I have a picture of a Crook on this stole and chasuble I am wearing today - I also have a broomstick ... I wonder if you know why I have the broomstick?

It is because the parallel story to the lost sheep is the lost coin – a reminder of my job is to gather the lost and the lonely and bring them into the fold... like the good shepherd and the woman who swept for the lost coin...

The idea of Christ as the Good Shepherd, and we as the sheep is a powerful and moving one.

What does it mean to be guided by Jesus the shepherd as opposed to following all that Google has to offer...?

I'm sure you have seen artwork depicting a young, clear-skinned and shiny shepherd, carrying a sweet and freshly shampooed lamb over his shoulders. The Shepherd depicted as noble and strong, the lamb, cute and adoring? This over romantic view is I think far from the image Jesus gives us...

Because saying I am the good shepherd would have been a strange thing for a Rabbi to do

Because Rabbis and shepherds were at opposite ends of society.

Being a shepherd was not a cute job – it was a hard and dangerous job, especially in Palestine. Pasture was scarce, and the central plateau, where it was found, was only a few miles wide. Cliffs on either side of the plateau made it a dangerous place for stray sheep. The Shepherd was responsible for the sheep of his master, and if one died or was lost, he would have to (at least) return the fleece to show how it had died, or he would be punished.

Sheep were not viewed as fluffy and cute rather they were slaughtered by the thousand in the Temple in Jerusalem, and every household killed a lamb at Passover time. In first century Palestine sheep had some religious significance, but they had very little value, existing only to be killed.

Shepherds were seen as rough, wild people, who lived on hillsides. There were not many rungs beneath them on the social ladder. The Pharisees especially despised the shepherds, as their job did not enable them to keep all the purity laws. So they were regarded as dirty low-lives - both religiously, as well as socially.

Then Jesus talks about an extraordinary shepherd, who loves his sheep so much that he is prepared to die for them. This is a crazy idea. The sheep exist to provide the shepherd with a livelihood – the shepherd being prepared to die for the sheep would make no sense at all to Jesus' followers. By identifying with such a lowly position we see in Jesus exceptional humility...

Jesus breaks down all our expectations of relationships.

It is a story of the despised looking for the insignificant. The Shepherd had the lowliest of jobs. One lamb did not count for much among many thousands that would be killed for Passover. Yet there is extreme beauty in a shepherd who cares for his sheep. Jesus was despised, rejected, one who knew sorrows, yet he cared for the tax-collectors, prostitutes, lepers and all who were seen as worthless.

I believe that the world knows no greater beauty than this story we have of Jesus' love.

The breath-taking beauty of this story lies in the fact that its origin is in what is common and ugly, not fit subjects for polite society. This story is radical and it is inclusive.

This is the heart of the Christian message. God wants to take whatever we have to offer. No matter how insignificant we feel it is, no matter how unworthy we feel, no matter how unlovable we may feel. God's love reaches out to us, and that love will take us home. It includes all people and it welcomes even those who feel they don't deserve it.

And so today as we have our APCM – a chance to reflect on the past year and to elect those who will take responsibility for the coming years and we remember that God takes us – and for those who are already members and those who are continuing and those who are taking up new positions - whatever we offer – whether we feel this to be good enough or not – we offer ourselves...

God's love reaches out to us so that we can follow in God's paths and we can lead others to these paths of righteousness. Our work in this church is so important – and gloriously we do this together as a team – maybe like the disciples a bit of a mixture of people – but look at the amazing work they did – together we can do amazing things. Let us move confidently to our meeting, taking responsibility for this church, knowing that God's love changes everything and that we can make such beautiful impact to those we serve.

Remembering our vision and our reading today – let us make this church fully inclusive, welcoming of all people – radically warm in its (at the moment virtual) embrace of all people. A family where all feel God’s love. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. Amen