My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.

Christ the Good Shepherd is such a well-known and much-loved image of Jesus which is still very powerful in its portrayal of the key elements of Christ’s mission and personal character today. I have seen at first hand a variety of different shepherding techniques throughout my ministry most of which has been served within a rural context. I have seen shepherds walking with their dogs across the wild expanse of hill farms in Cumbria and the Yorkshire Dales. I have seen shepherds riding around and collecting their sheep whilst driving quad bikes across rough terrain, and I have seen shepherds both tending their sheep and caring for them, in many ways often which are not that appealing to those of us not used to the rigours of the farming life.

Images which we prefer to see are those of Jesus gently cradling a lamb in his arms, or a modern-day farmers son or daughter gently feeding a solitary lamb with a bottle of milk. Shepherding however is not an easy life nor is it an easy image to the eye. This image reminds us of how difficult it is to care for the environment, to care for God’s creatures and ultimately how hard it is for us to care for one another.

Jesus uses this image beautifully because he is constantly aware of all the difficulties which lie ahead for him and for those who choose to follow him. He is the Good Shepherd; he is the one who on hearing his voice we the sheep of his fold immediately respond to. If we use the shepherd imagery, we know that the sheep of the field respond to those they know because they are very much dependent on the Good Shepherd to care for them, to feed them and to protect them. A bad shepherd is like those who run away at the sign of any difficulty and leave those in his care to their own devices. The Good Shepherd holds her ground and stays to protect support and see the sheep through the many pitfalls of their lives in order that they may stay safe and secure.

This is what Jesus offers us in and through this image today. We live in difficult times with the threat of war and global instability constantly surrounding us. We are worried about our futures our livelihoods, and the prosperity of our families, with many people throughout the world including our own society really struggling simply to afford the necessities of life.

So, what does Jesus offer us amid all our current turmoil?

Jesus the Good Shepherd declares that his sheep hear his voice, but how true is that today where are the sheep? If we look around there is hardly any one present, the sheepfold is looking rather sparsely populated and there is little sign of lambing within the fold of the Christian Church. Those of us who are left know Jesus, we have loved him for many years but when he speaks do we rush to him in order that we may be fed and nourished, or do we look elsewhere?

In many respects many of us have become rather complacent in our faith, we live comfortable lives, we may at times struggle a little and we may not always find ourselves achieving everything that we would wish to achieve, but generally we are not freezing to death, or starving from the lack of food. Some people are however but they are often lacking from our fold. I ask myself the question why?

If the Church is Jesus, the Good Shepherd in action today where are the sheep who wish to follow?

I have heard many stories as have you all about the role of the Church in Ukraine being one of the sources of help to those who are struggling and this, I applaud for that is the Churches role. Many Churches in our own society have also responded as best as they are able to the many different crisis in the world.

Many Christians seek to be Good Shepherds and go the extra mile to care for others, whether it be through charitable causes, helping as in my own case to run night shelters for the homeless, or providing food from our own plentiful larders to foodbanks to share with those struggling to feed their families. The list of good works goes on and on, the Church has always been at the centre of such approaches to life and rightly so, but the question remains why when the sheep hear the voice of the Good Shepherd calling them, they do not stay within the fold of the Churches life. They can come and be fed, they can receive the care and attention they need and receive things which sadly are often no longer available to them through the generosity of the State, but do they give thanks to God and worship him in return the answer it would seem is no they do not.

What is the point of Jesus the Good Shepherd when the sheep even when hearing his voice are not interested in getting to know him well nor are they interested in the promise of eternal life? They simply want a better life in the here and now.

So, what Shepherd will they respond to and how are they to be guided so that they will willingly and eagerly respond to the Church which is calling out to them?

This will only be possible if the Church becomes something different to what it has become. Jesus says that he gives his followers eternal life, that they will never perish and that no one will snatch them out of his hand. What Jesus does not say is that by becoming his followers they will not be cold because Jesus does not pay the gas bill, he does not say that they will never be hungry because they will be. When Jesus says those who follow me will never hunger or go thirsty, we explain it away by saying that he speaks spiritually. He will fill us full of love and compassion, but how useful is that if the bread we have before us is mouldy and the water is not fit to drink?

What is the point of a Good Shepherd if he cannot do the things a Good Shepherd does for his sheep?

Damning questions of the Church and the world in which we live. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and, in his life, he healed many, eased many in difficulty and even through the power of his name brought people back from the dead. This is what the Church should be sharing with its people. The depth of care, commitment, sharing and giving sacrificially for the sake of others revealed by Jesus should be at the centre of what the church is, and this is not an impossible ask for if we truly know Jesus, we shall run to him and seek to care for his sheep.

What it seems that has been lost over the generations of Church life is our hope and understanding of a faith which not only shows us how to live with one another peacefully and supportively, but a life which is meaningless without giving praise and thanks to God for it. Jesus tells us that he is not that interested in the righteous but that he truly rejoices when we save one sinner from the error of life and welcome that sinner into the life of the worshipping community. We have been good at helping but not very good at keeping the sinner simply because we have lost the depth of the message of Christ’s salvation.

The Church can once again be full and vibrant and a source of great shepherding, but only if the Church places first the needs of the sheep, and goes the extra mile for them, so that they in return will in the words of Jesus, hear his voice, know him as he knows them and then be prepared to follow him.

Let the Church stop being the Church it has become, let the Church become instead like Jesus, let us become Good Shepherds so that the sheep of the world may be fed and watered, kept warm and secure and live healthy, vibrant, and meaningful lives.

May the Church be so guided by Christ the Good Shepherd that the whole world may rejoice and give God the Glory for all that he so freely gives us and may the Churches generosity to others be an example of the need to live like any good shepherd, maintaining a devoted, and sacrificial life for the sake of the wider flock of humanity.

Thanks be to God.