

## Sermon 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2023 (SB)

### 1 Peter 5: 1-11.

“How can you go forward as a strong community when hardship comes? How can you stay together and be led well?” This is what Peter wants his readers to think about as he comes to the end of his letter. It will be crucial as they go through these difficult times that there are good relationships between those who lead, and those who are led.

In the public sphere, leaders are always in the news, very often for the wrong reasons. People we once thought of as honest and trustworthy may be shown to have major flaws. We have all become cynics. We struggle to find leaders who set a good example to those they lead. How do you find a good leader?

What we learn of Peter in the Gospels is that he was a big personality, emerging right from the start as a natural leader. We feel we know more about him than all the other disciples, because he is always mentioned when anything significant is happening, always quick to act or to speak, and although he didn't always get it right, he was clearly a passionate follower of Jesus. “You have the words of eternal life” he said to Jesus, there's no-one else we want to follow.

Peter learned from Jesus, first hand, about how to lead others. Sometimes he found it puzzling, as when Jesus washed his disciples' feet. “You will never wash my feet”, he blurted out. But Jesus quietly explained that he was setting an example of how they should behave towards one another. There should be no rivalry or jockeying for position; but they should care for one another. “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.”

Jesus trained Peter to be a leader in the church. From being a fisherman, he became a fisher of people, and then he would be given a new role: that of a shepherd.

Right from the start Jesus wanted Peter to be sure of his motivation, so he asked him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me? Then take care of my sheep”. Take care of my sheep, because you love me, not for any other reason.

And so, in this letter, Peter speaks to the elders, not with a dictatorial tone, but by describing himself as a fellow elder, and also as someone who knew Jesus, witnessed his sufferings, and learned from him. He starts by asking them to think about *their* motivation.

Verse 2 “Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

The elders must also know that they are accountable to Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, Verse 4 “And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”

Unlike the world, where the tendency is for leaders to seek acclaim, power, prestige, and reward for their work from those around them, the elders are to wait for affirmation from the only one who can truly judge them, Jesus.

Then he speaks a word to those who are younger. They are also to guard against the dangers of pride. “Be submissive to those who are older.” That’s a challenge for any young person! “Submissive” is not a word we like very much these days, and I don’t suppose times have changed that much.

But Peter is clear “All of you” (and I take that to mean the whole Christian community whatever their age or status) “clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’”.

We all have people we learn from who are older and wiser than us. I can remember coming to St Paul’s and learning from older members of the congregation (people who were the elders of their day): the way they spoke, the way they acted, the way they prayed – these were people who lived their faith and they made a deep impression on me.

So, if the elders can be regarded as shepherds, those they lead must be the sheep. Sheep come in different breeds and temperaments. Some have pretty faces, like the Herdwicks – they’re just plain cute and cuddly. Others are stubborn, have horns and stare at you menacingly – even the shepherds are slightly nervous about them! Which are you?

The job of the shepherd is to enable them to grow into the biggest, fattest, healthiest, happiest sheep there ever has been. But sheep have responsibilities too. The trouble with sheep is that they’re very often so busy eating grass that they don’t notice where they’re going, and they end up getting lost. Sheep are not stupid, as some people suppose, but they need to keep their wits about them.

Peter has a word for all of us who may have sheep-like inclinations. Verse 8 “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” In challenging times, sheep need to resist the temptation to keep their heads down. They need to keep an eye on where they are going and why. They need to keep their eye on the Chief Shepherd and his vision for them. They need to be self-controlled and alert. Peter has said that already earlier in his letter, in chapter 4 verse 7: “Be clear minded and self-controlled (why?)\_ so that you can pray.”

Prayer is one of the weapons they will need when hard times come, and when the lions are prowling.

They need to be alert and watchful for danger which may come suddenly without warning. “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.”

What are the things we need to resist? What are the things that challenge us?

We may not think we are suffering because of our faith, but we do in the sense that we care about what is happening in the world around us, God’s world, and we care about those who are suffering directly.

We may be troubled by the overwhelming sense that all is not well, that the relative stability of many people's lives, and our own, is being threatened. We see people suffering because of large scale things like war, poverty, and the climate crisis. We can end up with a feeling of dislocation and a fear of the future. We need to resist the temptation to think there is no hope.

As Peter says, these are things that our brothers and sisters are facing all over the world. But then he reminds his readers (verse 10) that God is a God of grace who will restore, making them strong, firm and steadfast throughout all their trials.

And there's another very important verse for those who are feeling unsettled and uncertain of what the future may bring, verse 7: "Cast all your anxiety on him (that is, on God) because he cares for you."

So let these words encourage us too. Let us think of ourselves as being gathered here so that we can learn from one another, care for one another, be the best we can be as a Christian community that reaches out to those around us. We don't operate like the world at large, where power is so sought after, and often misused. Jesus often spoke about God's kingdom as being open to those with least power. "Unless you receive the kingdom as a child you cannot enter it". He might have said, unless you receive the kingdom of God as a sheep who allows itself to be led, you cannot enter it. After all, what power does a sheep have? Peter had learned that from watching Jesus: the one who *had* ultimate power, and yet laid it aside so that he could complete the task he had to do in redeeming the world.

Peter speaks to us all then, whether shepherd or sheep, when he says: be humble, be alert, and remember your motivation – you are here because you love Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, and he will see you through, whatever challenges may come, making you strong, firm and steadfast.

Let us pray:

Thank you, Father God, that you take such good care of us, in every situation. We can, truly cast all our anxiety on you. Help us to be faithful to you as you are faithful to us. Help us not to keep our heads down, but to look up, to keep our eyes on you and to your vision for us. Amen.