

## Fourth Sunday of Easter

Dear Parishioners, dear Friends,

On the first Easter Sunday Jesus was raised from the dead. He entered into a totally new life, he was not revived as the young daughter of Jairus had been, nor as the widow's son had been at Nain, nor as had been his friend Lazarus who had spent up to four days in a tomb. All three were restored to the life of which death had robbed them, but they went on to live like anyone else; they could have succumbed to illness, been happy or unhappy, but we know for sure that they died even if we are left in ignorance by the evangelists as to when and where.

The life into which Jesus was ushered by resurrection was that new life which is promised to us all and in which we profess our faith in the closing verses of the Creed. What matters most to us is that Jesus is as alive and present to us in 2020, regardless of where we are, as he was to those to whom he revealed himself on that first Easter Sunday. He is in glory, seated at the right hand of the Father, but also present with us. Our reflection on the Emmaus story last week suggested to us that we recognise the risen and living Jesus especially in the proclamation of the Word of God, in the gathering of his people in the liturgical assembly and – as the Emmaus disciples discovered – in the breaking of bread. The mode of presence and the profile of the risen Lord that is most frequently highlighted by the Church, and arouses the deepest response among the Christian faithful, is that of *Good Shepherd*. This Sunday it is on that image that the liturgy focuses. It was one familiar to the Jewish people to whom Jesus belonged: *the Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want (Ps 23, 1)*. This prayer from the Jewish prayer book which is a favourite among Christians, particularly at moments of insecurity, grief and fear – such as what we are going through now as Covid -19 has the whole world in its grip – presents the one God in whom they placed their faith as a *shepherd*. It was a profile Jesus applied frequently to himself and, as the early Christians celebrated his resurrection and abiding presence among them, is it any surprise that they envisaged him as *good shepherd*?

If Jesus is shepherd to his people, is it any wonder that the Church has from the earliest times seen those who minister in the Lord's name to his people as *shepherds* who enter into a *pastoral* relationship with his people. The ministry of the priest is primarily and above all else *pastoral*. He frequently refers to the people confided to his care as his *flock*. And indeed, just like the shepherd, he keeps his flock together, he leads them, sees to it that they have food, protects them from their enemies and, should one of them go astray, go in search of the lost sheep. It is a huge affirmation of his pastoral calling that the priest be seen by the Church as fulfilling the role of shepherd. *A fortiori* are bishops considered shepherds, their crozier a stylized version of the shepherd's crook. With all this in mind, it is appropriate that on this day the whole Church pray for vocations to the priesthood and remember in prayer the apostolic work and human kindness of those already ordained and with many years of ministry behind them. We need good shepherds and we need not only to encourage men to think seriously about themselves engaging in priestly ministry but to pray continually for those who do. That prayer is all the more urgent now

that our churches are closed and we can no longer gather with our priest for the celebration of Mass. The Good Shepherd is still with his flock and good shepherds/priests across the globe are also with their people.

**Father Patrick**