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Acts 9.36-43, Psalm 23, Revelation 7.9-17, John 10.22-30

One of the memorable moments of the 1982 Falklands War was Brian Hanrahan's report on the British Harriers that took off from their carrier ship to join the conflict. Those words: 'I counted them all out and I counted them all back' – they were actually a piece of clever phrasing to get round reporting restrictions – he was not able to say directly that all the harriers had returned safely. But the effect was not just that of imparting information. There was something very moving about the picture of the bespectacled reporter with the heaving grey South Atlantic behind him and the planes coming in one by one from real danger and conflict. On another level the report played into a deep memory of what we might call pastoral care. The harriers were counted – out as they went on their mission - back as they came safely to rest.

It is a shepherd who counts his flock, who knows them all by name, who counts them out and counts them back. Today is known in the Roman calendar as Good Shepherd Sunday because the imagery of our Lord Jesus Christ as the shepherd is present in the Gospel of the day and in the Psalm. 'The Lord is my shepherd'. We are familiar with the idea of God as the shepherd of his people Israel. And in the scriptures God's shepherding care extends his people to the whole of creation. Psalm 147 'He heals the broken-hearted and binds up all their wounds. He counts the number of the stars and calls them by their names'. And Matthew 10. 29 where the fall of a single sparrow is seen by the Father and even the hairs of your head are all counted.

This is why the 23rd Psalm is so popular at the transition points, at weddings and even more at funerals. At those times when our identity is changing, or when it is threatened by death or bereavement scripture gives us speech: 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.' He counts us out and he counts us back. God's care is never remote, abstract or bureaucratic. It is the care of one who knows us deeply and personally. In the Biblical picture that fatherly, motherly care runs through the whole of creation, overseeing each dividing cell and erupting star. The whole network, is graced, is known, is grounded in God's heart. I always love the lines of that harvest hymn: 'He only is the maker of all things near and far, he paints the wayside flower, he lights the evening star'. And you can almost see the Lord coming out with his paint brush and creating the petals in scarlet or sky blue and holding a taper to the stars. Of course it is poetry and metaphor but only by such vivid language can the human heart be informed. And we need to be informed, because the care of the Good Shepherd is to be lived in the church.

The reading from Acts gives us an example of pastoral care from the earliest days of the Christian church. The death of Tabitha, Dorcas, is told with heart-rending simplicity. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity, as it says in our reading. But then comes the detail. This was not impersonal caring, caring as a Christian duty. Dorcas was practical and specific. The widows who mourned her had a whole range of her needlecraft to show Peter when he arrived. She clothed them when they were poor and afraid and had only rags. She cared for their dignity. And I can't help hearing in this an echo of the garden of Eden. After eating the fruit Adam and Eve had sewn aprons out of fig leaves to cover their nakedness. So they tried to deal with their shame and guilt. God, however, even as he banished them from the garden, ensured that they were protected from the wilderness of the world and 'made coats of skins and clothed them'.

We can see in this what we often fail to see, that God treats us as his own. He counts us out and he counts us in and he knows us one by one and by name. And those who understand this, those who have felt that steady, personal, overseeing love are often moved to want to imitate that love. They simply know, or discover themselves learning, how to be faithful shepherds to others.

The imagery of shepherding surrounds Christian ideas about ministry. Christian ministers are pastors. They are held to account by the Good Shepherd. One of the most challenging moments in the ordination service for priests is in the introduction where the Bishop announces that those about to be priested 'are to set the example of the Good Shepherd always before them as a pattern of their calling'. It does fall to priests to have oversight, 'to count them out

and to count them in', to know those for whom they care, not in an intrusive or over familiar way, but as people who try to see something of who their people are. Priests can be wrong or misguided of course, but the attempt is what ministry means. Oversight means above all, 'seeing', seeing who is there and not there, seeing what is going on. Learning to hear silences, learning to read body language. Learning sometimes to wait for the meaning of anger, absence or coldness to be revealed.

But this oversight is shared. Dorcas was not a priest and yet she exercised a shepherd's ministry. And that is true of many of you, both here and elsewhere. This congregation produces shepherds, in hospitals, schools, surgeries, colleges, care homes, businesses. And I think we need to take from the scriptures that shepherding is not some esoteric exceptional ministry. It is the way we are made to take care of one another, the way we are meant to serve one another.

Here at St Bene't's it is a ministry of welcome exercised by our coffee makers, by those who care for our children, by our flower arrangers, our sidesmen, and all those who do very specific and practical things that might nudge those who wander through our doors towards an awareness of the love that surrounds them. That might mean writing a cheque, it might mean picking a discarded paper bag from the floor, it might mean making a phone call.

When the widows Dorcas has clothed clung on to the tunics it was not just because they were useful but because they were sacraments of her love, a love great enough for her to be raised from the dead. The ordination service reminds priests that the treasure to be entrusted to them is Christ's own flock, bought by the shedding of his blood on the cross, and that it is to him that we shall render account for our stewardship of his flock. We shall all make account before the Good Shepherd at the end of our lives for what we have done with the time, talents and opportunities given to us. And it is worth considering what sacraments of love we have left behind us, what are the clothes and tunics that the poor in our lives would bring out to remember us. What witness have we given to the painter of the flowers painter and the lamplighter of the stars who counts every atom and cell of creation. For we are judged not by our wealth, status or worldly achievements, but by how much we have made love real in God's world. That is the treasure in heaven which we are commanded to lay up for ourselves, and it is the only treasure worth having.