

The Bible readings for this 25th April 2021 are:
Acts 4:5-12, 1 John 3:16-end and John 10:11-18.

In this week's Gospel reading, we hear Jesus describing himself with one of those 'I am' statements. I am the Good Shepherd and we hear repeatedly (in fact five times!) say that He would "lay down His life" for His sheep, for His disciples, for us. What comfort these words bring to us – knowing that our Good Shepherd loved us enough to take our sins upon Himself, on the cross, in order to bring us forgiveness and the promise that we would be "gathered into His fold" with Him forever more!

There was another shepherd, David, under the inspiration of God, penned the words of the 23rd Psalm, which in turn, have inspired countless people since then to trust in the Good Shepherd where His rod and staff bring comfort. And because He promises to be with us, then we fear no evil!

This same "shepherd of our souls" calls His followers (His lambs) to love one another.

In John 15 we hear

"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down one's life for his friends."

So, what is "Love?"

I'm reminded of the 'Love is...' cartoons of the 60's and 70's.
How would you finish that sentence? Love is...?

We use the word "love" so frequently, and in so many ways, that it almost lost its meaning. We "love" certain foods, we love sport and football clubs, we might love times of peace and relaxation but do we really do justice to the word "love" when we use it in this way?

In Greek there are actually 7 words for love that we have brought together into one fold, so to speak, when we speak of love. Greek differentiates the “Romantic Love”, the “Affectionate Love”, the “Familiar Love”, the “Enduring Love”, “Self-Love/Self-Compassion”. But the way that Jesus so often uses the word, the love to which Jesus calls us is so much deeper, so much more profound.

It is Agape — “Unconditional Love”

Agape is by far the most special, most respectful of all the Greek types of love. And it is the kind Jesus refers to in his ministry time and time again. It is the one all of the Christian faith encompasses. And it is the kind of love that Jesus calls us to show. It is universal, unconditional, and a selfless love for others. In fact it involves caring more for others than for yourself. Jesus perfectly exemplified *agape* love when He died on the cross to save us from sin and death. He suffered so we could be free.

And this is what we are called to when we are called to love one another as Jesus loved us – I’m going to change that slightly to as Jesus loves us.

He was not only willing to **die** for us, He was willing – and did – **live** for us and lives today!

It is “easy” for us to claim to be willing to die for those we say we love, but are we, at the same time, willing to live our lives in service to them too?

How do we “live this out” in our lives as spouses, as parents, as children, as Christians followers of the Good Shepherd?

Well when I was exploring whether I should apply for this post God gave me an image, a picture, and it was that of a motor car. So you have the car with its 4 wheels, each of those wheels representing one of the parishes within the Mid-Fosse group.

And of course a car has another wheel, the steering wheel. And I see that as me steering and guiding. But you might well ask - who is in the driving seat? I hope that you'd recognise that that was God!

I realise now that that this is the ultimate vision that God has for the Mid-Fosse parishes – we're not quite there yet!

And I want to say that **we** – not just I – have a lot of work to do to bring in God's vision for us.

On reflection, during this vrey difficult time to start any new job, I have come to realise that we are a very long way from the chequered flag and the finish line.

I want to keep that imagery of the car going. And I've been reflecting on each of the parishes being that wheel – the problem is they're just not yet on the car! They are back in their garages.

When we think of a wheel it has central hub – the Churchwardens and the PCCs I would suggest; and then the centre hub has spokes going out (the relationships radiating out to the rim to the boundaries and perhaps beyond of the parish. The tyre is the church members and we are all involved, we are all linked by the relationship to the central hub. What we need to do now is to get our wheels and get them onto an axle, thus giving the potential to be added to the car.

Now because of a variety of reasons, the interregnum and Covid being just 2, our wheels are separated in the garages. I believe that our first task is to reassess each of the wheels. Check them out. Check what kind of order they're in. That means each parish taking a good, long hard look at where they are. What needs strengthening? Or inflating? What are the pressures? Too much work, too few helpers and volunteers?

See we need to take that new commandment the Jesus gave us really, really seriously. We need to love one another as Jesus loved (and loves) us. We need to set aside our own needs and instead look to the needs of others. We need to work together, to pull together, we need to get the wheels back on the car – so that we are ready and able to drive off into whatever direction God takes us.

Now I don't promise you an easy ride. The road will be bumpy! We might get stuck in a quagmire en-route. There may be one or two occasions where we hear the satnav going re-routeing, turn around where possible. With all of the opportunities to try things we have to be prepared to go out on this journey. There might even be times when we get a puncture and we have to pause and address issues in each of the parishes or more likely the wheels will need realigning.

So, as the “sheep of His pasture,” or using the more modern term the wheels on His car, in loving response to His love for us, we must follow “His command: to believe in the name of Jesus Christ and to love one another as He commanded us.” (1 John 3:23)

That we together may be brought into one flock. There is one God. There is one universal church. May we as a group of parishes become one flock. Where we care for one another in a way where we are willing to lay aside our individual life for the common good of the whole. And may this car be like an Aston Martin zooming off with confidence where God will take us.

That we may **“Love and live like Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour! Our Good Shepherd”**

Amen.