

**Sunday May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009**  
**St. Paul's Cathedral Sermon**  
**Easter 4**

May the words of my mouth,  
And the meditations of our hearts,  
Be acceptable in your sight,  
O Lord, our Shepherd and Redeemer.  
Amen.

Before coming to St. Paul's Cathedral, almost a year ago now,  
I was serving in a two point rural church up in Lucan and Clandeboye.

In my nine months there I learned a lot about rural ministry,  
I discovered a little bit about how unique small churches are,  
and I got to experience, first hand, good old country hospitality.

One of the beautiful things about small town hospitality  
Is that people often tell you exactly what they think. No beating around the bush!  
And sometimes the best pieces of advice hit you out of the blue.

Two Sundays before my what was going to be my last service up in Lucan,  
A service where I was going to get a chance to say goodbye and preach for my last time,  
one of the parishioners from St. James Clandeboye approached me after the service.

She asked me if I knew what was happening in two weeks.  
Hesitantly, I said, "Ya, in two weeks is my last service with you."  
She responded, "Oh well, ya there's that, but more importantly,  
It's going to be shepherding Sunday.

Like I said, out of the blue. I hadn't even looked at the readings yet.  
Then she said, "Have you ever actually seen sheep before?"  
"Not like in a zoo, or on the side of the highway."

I had to admit that I had never really seen sheep before.  
"How are you supposed to preach about shepherds then?" she asked.  
So, on the spot I was invited to join her for tea on her family farm,  
to visit with her sheep.

Following the service we went to her farm and walked out to the barn with a mug of tea  
in our hands and she told me all about her sheep.

It's really a remarkable thing, she said, that part about them following the voice of the  
Shepherd, it's true. They come when my husband calls them.  
He goes out into the field with a feed pail in his hand,  
But it is not the pail that does the trick,

It's in the moment they recognize his voice.  
She pointed to a particularly large sheep.  
And said, She's the one who's really in charge. She's the lead ewe.

When she says it's okay to follow, then the rest will come.  
Then it's usually a race to see who gets to the barn first.  
My husband, well he's certainly been knocked over a time or two.

It's a remarkable thing:  
they trust him, they know that he takes care of them like no one else.

Now, for the other half of the story.  
She stopped and smiled at me, and then continued on.

You know, there was a period of time when my husband had to go away on business,  
And I had to take over the feeding of the sheep for a couple of weeks.  
I'd watched my husband do it hundreds of times, so I thought, I should be fine.

So on that first morning, I went out with a full feed pail, just like my husband always  
does, and I called to them, in exactly the way he always did.

And they stood there and looked at me. Not a single one of them moved.  
I called again and the lead ewe stood there, right in front of me, and stared me down.  
They knew, oh they knew, this wasn't their shepherd, mine wasn't the right voice.  
I was an impostor.  
They didn't trust me. The younger sheep at the back actually started to cautiously back  
off in the opposite direction.

So, defeated, but with a new respect for the intelligence for the sheep, she walked back  
into the barn and poured out the feed, and only when the lead ewe had watched her  
completely leave the barn area did the sheep hesitantly enter, as a group, to eat.

The next day she tried again, this time throwing out a little bit of the feed here and there  
to catch their attention,  
Come here, try it, it's good for you, really! she pleaded,  
but again they recognized that her voice was not the voice of their shepherd and they  
waited until she was long out of sight before entering the barn again.

It took about a week of trying the same routine over and over before she made a little  
headway with the sheep.  
Eventually, the lead ewe seemed to pass judgement that, while not her husband, this  
stranger could do for now.

She tried many attempts at manipulation, persuasion, and acts of simple desperation to lead the sheep, but nothing would work until the sheep had made their own decision.

But after a week of trying to gain their trust, the lead ewe eventually followed her back into the barn to feed.

And as the rest of the flock tends to do, they followed their leader into the barn after her. Success at last!

At the end of her story she added,

Even though the sheep eventually came to be comfortable with me, they always knew that I wasn't their shepherd. That role would always belong to her husband.

All humanity belongs to God.

As God's Son, Jesus recognized that he was responsible not only for his family, his disciples, and those who followed him in the faith, but for all people.

One shepherd....one flock....all of humanity.

Jesus also recognized that if he was responsible for the care of all people,

There were many impostors who sought to steal from his flock –to kill and destroy.

Jesus wasn't the only prophet in his day. There were all sorts of conflicting voices to be heard amongst the sheep.

All sorts of promises.

And behind each of those promises was a thief waiting for the opportunity to steal from God's flock. Or another hired hand just looking out for himself.

Jesus warned us that there will always be bandits masquerading as Messiahs.

But isn't this the same with our world?

Who are today's Messiahs?

Well, everything in this world, everything that you could want or desire, is available for a price.

More and more we are living in a secular age of consumerism, where, while the message of the Gospel is always free, people pay a lot of money to avoid hearing it.

The Messiahs of today come in many forms.

And it's a hot market because each of us is looking for the promise of a fulfilled life, something that is always better than we are, more confident, more intelligent, more comfortable.

What's salvation mean to us? Well...

We can lose fifty pounds with only a few pills and look just like the model on television. We can spend \$5000 and always have that head of hair we've been envious for -the one that will cause women to throw themselves in our path, or make our wife love us again.

If we are looking for love, we are told that we can pay someone to find us that perfect person.

If we don't like who we are we can change our identity as quick as a change of designer clothes or some plastic surgery.

If we don't know who we are, we watch Dr. Phil or pick up a self-help book at Chapters to find that "Real You – That Inner Self" that will save us from all of our problems.

Sure, all of this is expensive, but

If we have money problems, there are all sorts of people willing to lend it to us,

Of course, all of them are honest, all of them are looking out for our best intentions.

That's what they tell us anyway.

And if we are actually looking for Jesus, today, we can find him in the comfort of our homes, on television, being preached by the televangelists who pray for the poor, the sick, and the oppressed while they fly around the world in private jets and live in million dollar Texas ranches,

Who promise that they will heal you if you only send in \$50 to support their ministries.

Today's promises are many, but unfortunately,

fulfilment lasts only as long as it can be paid for.

Well, then I guess that there is one thing we know for sure:

Salvation is a six figure salary.

But none of this is new to us.

Jesus reminded us two thousand years ago that there are thieves who are always seeking to come and destroy us.

The next time someone tells you that salvation costs....only this much.... and can be mailed to you at the end of the week, ask yourself the question of: Will they still be there for you when the warranty expires or it doesn't work anymore?

Probably not.  
They won't be there.  
But Jesus will be there.  
Willing to take us back into the flock.  
Willing to reunite us with our loved ones, and those who care for us.  
Willing to place his own life in danger for our protection.

Jesus says he is our Shepherd. He also says that that he is the gate placed around the flock for our protection.  
To fend off the bandits, to keep out the thieves.

**To protect us from all those who come bearing a pail full of false promises.**

Jesus is the good shepherd,  
He knows his own and never stops calling to his flock.  
And although we may ignore his voice at stages throughout our lives,  
we will also recognize it, and feel its sense of comfort and peace as it calls us home to safety.

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd."  
But what does that actually mean to us from our perspective?

Perhaps the most important thing that I learned from my visit to that country sheep farm,  
Is this.....

What do we know about the shepherd at the end of the story?  
If we were all really, really smart sheep, what would we eventually recognize about all shepherds? About all Messiahs?

Well the honest truth is, even the best shepherds,  
No matter how they protect their sheep,  
No matter how their sheep respond to their call,  
No matter how they know them personally,

Even the best shepherds  
lead their flock to the slaughterhouse.

So, how is Jesus any better than all of those false Messiah's at the end of the day?

Well, we may not find it in our Gospel today,  
But there was another parable that St. John implicitly wrote,  
And that is the parable of the Lead Ewe.

Jesus, as God, became incarnate so that he would be perfectly human.  
As a human he lived and as a human he suffered and died on the cross.  
Jesus became a sheep just like the rest of us.

Unlike all the other false Messiahs in his day and ours,  
Jesus is the lead ewe.  
Jesus leads all members of his flock to the only death that will actually save us.  
Jesus leads us to the cross.

Jesus doesn't entice us with a pail full of false promises,  
Instead he leads us to die with him, so that we may live new life in him.

What then, for us, is really salvation?

This is what the psalmist wrote: