

Chrism Communion**Where is Jesus?**

It's been quite a year, with a challenging combination of five growing crises: environmental, economic, ethnic, Europe and epidemiological. We might ask, in the middle of all this, "Where is Jesus?" Reflecting on this question, I was struck by one tiny phrase in our first reading, 'he is keeping the sheep'. So where is Jesus? He is with us, deeper than each and all of our growing crises. He is keeping us. He is the One who will keep us going, be with us in sickness, suffering, death and our own shortcomings. He's our Good Shepherd. Those who have gone before us have found this to be true. I've used the prayer called *St Patrick's Breastplate* to remind me of this during this year. I'll share a presentation of it later on.

Keeping Sheep

I have also found it helpful to return to Brueggemann's little book on the spirituality of the Psalms. I've found it helpful to reflect on his description of how the Psalmist portrays what happens when change comes. Brueggemann discerns three aspects to the process: orientation, disorientation & reorientation.

Psalm 23, the Psalm of the Good Shepherd, condenses this whole process into one Psalm. Here I walk with the Lord who is my Shepherd, the One who keeps me. The Shepherd leads me to experience many good things; he leads me besides still waters and feeds me. Yet the Lord is also with me as I walk through the deepest, darkest valley, when life is hard, disconnected, chaotic. I don't like these times, but this is when God really can come close; he keeps me. My disorientation gives way to new life and I find a table prepared before me, my head is anointed and my cup overflows. I'm in God's house of blessing.

The last year or so has felt like that to me. I've felt badly jolted. My sense of how life works, my deep orientation, has been disrupted. I've felt very disorientated. Daily life and future plans have been thrown into disarray. And tragedy has struck at the heart of our personal lives and in the life of the nation. But despite this, many of us have also begun to find a new way of living, a reorientation. We've learnt to use Zoom! We've developed positive habits of living with restrictions. We've come to know ourselves better and to care for neighbours in a new way. We've become more realistic about what matters. Yet, for some, it's got worse – there is no reorientation to a better life. This is a challenge to us all. How can we find a way of ensuring the uplift of all, the building-back of the missing elements of care and support? There is a need for greater economic and social justice; a recommitment to social values.

Going Forward

Jesus does come to us in the middle of our crises. Some of us may have had the privilege of hearing people's quiet encounter with Jesus. It is not uncommon for people to say, "It went very quiet, and I heard a voice saying, 'I love you'." Old wounds have been re-opened, but also healed anew. Beyond this personal level, we as Christians are also called to find out where Jesus is keeping the sheep in our wider society. As a Diocese we are about 20,000 regular worshippers set amongst about 1.2m people in our region. Our calling is to serve them, and to witness to the Good Shepherd who keeps them.

In the coming year I hope to visit all the Deaneries. I want to spend time with Christian leaders and with communities, hearing people's concerns and hopes. We have been through a tough time in this Diocese. The need to prune our staffing and support, and our stipendiary clergy, has been, and is, very painful. But I'm hopeful that we can regrow our numbers so that we can better serve our wider community. This will mean us giving ourselves anew to the Diocesan priorities of living generously, making disciples, re-imagining church, and transforming society. We can do this. The Good Shepherd is with us, keeping us.

So what will keep you going? Let me now share a presentation of the One who has kept me going this last year or so: Jesus, the one who greets me each day as I arise with him and as he leads me day by day. May the Lord bless you and keep you in your ministry, as you trust in him and serve others in his Name.

Amen.