

Easter IV, 2024

John 10:11-18: The Good Shepherd

Wolves.

The good shepherd sees the wolf coming, and he lays down his life for the sheep.

Now, maybe, wolves are hard done by. The website 'Living with Wolves' opens by telling me that wolves are caring, playful, and above all devoted to family. They educate their young and care for their injured. They are, the site claims, like elephants, gorillas, and dolphins, some of the noblest creatures with whom we share the planet.

So we may be doing them an injustice. However, park the real wolves for the moment, and think, just for now, with St. John, of the wolf as metaphor, the wolf as symbol. What do wolves symbolise?

Violence, destruction, devouring, biting, tearing, howling, chaos, death.

There is a reason, after all, why England hunted them to extinction.

There remains, though, that which the wolf symbolised.

What are you terrified by? What, for you, might be lurking, eyeing you up, licking its lips, ready to tear and eat?

I'll go first.

Looking at my boys, I'm scared of drugs, of knives, of cars and drink, of gangs. Of everything that might take years of love and just snuff it out.

I'm scared that inside me, even now, there might be cells beginning to go wrong, that cancer is beginning its work.

I'm scared that the wrong kind of proteins could be secretly building up in my brain, and that one day everything will go cloudy and I won't be me anymore.

I'm scared that one day soon, the Iranians or the Israelis will make their last misjudgement, that all this careful tit for tat will explode into mushroom clouds. I'm scared that Putin really does want his Empire back, and that sensible people keep talking as if war is round the corner.

That's the wolf-pack in my mind. That's what ready to kill and devour.

And of course, behind it all, lurks the great Wolf-Chieftain. What am I *really* afraid of, in all these things? I'm afraid of death – by which I don't just mean physical death, though that's part of it. More the sense that everything good, everything precious, is doomed to defeat. That the whole thing is sliding down into ruin. That everything and everyone I love is wolf-meat.

Well, that's enough terror for one morning. You get the idea. Your wolves may be different, of course, but I bet they're there, and I bet the same chieftain lurks behind them.

The Gospel is Jesus Christ is bigger and stronger and fiercer than all the wolves put together.

The Gospel is that on the Cross, and in his Resurrection, Jesus Christ wrestled with the wolves and beat them down.

The Gospel is that because of what He did, the wolves never, ever, win. Because of Jesus Christ, you and I are destined for joy beyond imagining. Everything we hope for will come true, and everything we fear will pass away. The wolves have been defanged. The Good Shepherd has got us in his hands, and *nothing* can snatch us out of them.

Now, note, please, what's not being said. I'm not saying that terrible things won't happen. I might get cancer. The brain might go wrong. The missiles might fly, and explode, explode *here*. Terrible things might happen. They *will* happen. Being a Christian doesn't mean, not for a moment, that you get some kind of pass, some magical protection from everything. No: think of St. Lawrence, think of St. Alban, of Peter, of Paul ... these great Christians, our heroes, none of them died peacefully in their beds.

The promise is not that bad things won't happen. As the Psalm says, we still walk through the valley of the shadow of death. It's still packed with wolves, and they still want to eat us. And often, they will. They can wreck this life. But Jesus Christ will take the wreckage, and make it glorious. Pain, death, suffering ... these things that we feared were the end: it turns out they're the beginning. As Paul says, they're like the birth pangs. Jesus Christ brings us through it, and out the other side, into beauty and glory and power. That's why the martyrs didn't fear. 'Who will separate us from the love of God in Christ? Will hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.'

That's the Gospel. That's why the risen Jesus is always saying, 'It is I. Don't be afraid!'. Don't be afraid. If we knew, really knew, how much we are loved. If we really understood how firmly we are held, and who has got us in our hands, we would not be scared of anything. I'm reminded of a funeral I took here some years ago, interestingly enough of a lady who didn't ever come to church, who was asked by her family, as she was dying, whether she was scared. 'Scared?', she said, 'Scared? What have I got to be scared of? I believe in Jesus Christ.' That's Lawrence, or Alban, speaking right there. That's resurrection confidence.

What if, though, it doesn't feel that way? What if, in the midst of *your* wolves, you feel alone, afraid, and very uncertain that the Good Shepherd *has* got you? What if he feels very, very distant indeed? Perhaps even, not real.

Well, the first thing to say is that if you're not in the habit of looking for him, you're not likely to see him. Bluntly, if you are not coming to communion, if you're not praying, if you're not reading the Bible, it is not surprising that God seems distant. He still loves you, of course, but you have drifted far away. You're not paying attention. It is completely unsurprising that your faith is weak if you're not feeding it.

That is important and true, but there's still something else to be said. Even if you are doing all that, even if you are a good, faithful, practising, praying Christian, sometimes you can still feel alone. Still feel afraid. Even the best Christians can go through that. It is that famous *Footsteps* poem, isn't it. A man looks back at his life as if it were a set of footprints in the sand, his and the Lord's, walking together. But he sees, to his confusion, that at the worst moments, the darkest times, there was but one set. Why was that God, he said, why, when I needed you most, did you leave me on my own? Son, God said, when you see just one set prints in the sand, that was when I carried you.

You see, ultimately, it is not about our feelings. You may not *feel* that God is close. You may not *feel* that you are held. It may not feel as if the wolves are beaten. The Gospel is not about feelings. It is great if feelings come, and they often do, but the Gospel is not about feelings. It is about fact, about the great objective fact, that in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ he took on the wolves, and he beat them. We don't believe in our feelings, we believe in that great, supreme Reality. Feelings come and go. That victory endures forever.

Jesus Christ is the good shepherd. Do not be afraid. He's got you, and whatever kind of wolves you're facing, he's going to bring you home. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.