



Dr Janet Bottoms on 17th May 2026 – a Reflection

Readings: *John 10: 1- 4, 7- 10; Ephesians 2: 8-10; 3: 14- 21*

Service led by members of the Evangelism & Service Group

The words of Jesus, the good shepherd. “I came that they may have life – and have it more abundantly.” Or, in the Revised English Bible, “ and may have it in all its fullness”- that is “superabundant “, exceeding all expectations, or “ fulfilled” and complete, where we find the same idea in Ephesians.

Jesus as the “good shepherd” is a picture we know well, and a natural one for a people living in a largely rural and pastoral community, but it did not originate with Jesus. We find it in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, where it arises out of the prophet’s - or rather God’s - denunciation of the leaders of the people – leaders who should be their shepherds but instead are feeding and caring only for themselves. They are “bad” shepherds and God says, through his prophet, therefore “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.”

In the REB this is translated as “leave the healthy and strong to play, and give them their proper food.” Either or both, as I understand it, are possible translations There is, of course, nothing wrong with being healthy and strong – indeed it is good - but the “strong” sheep in Ezekiel are bullies, pushing the weaker out of the way, or, as we might put it today , scorning or ill-treating the poor, and exploiting the under-privileged for their own benefit.

In Ezekiel God’s emphasis is primarily on justice and redressing the balance between the “strong” and the “weak”. In John’s gospel Jesus also denounce the “thief” who steals or uses the sheep for his own advantage, but the main emphasis in the words of Jesus is on the positive; that is, on “abundant” life for all the sheep, “life in all its fullness”; and that is our theme today. In his own ministry, as well as in his direction to his disciples, Jesus’s “way” is to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to cleanse the leper and actively to seek out the lost or lonely, the uncared for, the marginalized and stigmatized. It is to set people free from the limitations imposed on them by poverty or ill health or the inequalities of opportunity found in even a supposedly equal and caring nation.

“Life in all its fullness”, what we might call a “good life ” - is not to be found in possession of the material things promoted by society, though we can’t have it without at least some of them. Rather, it is in a life with purpose, hope and dignity, with strong and loving relationships, and the opportunity to learn and to grow in body, in mind and in spirit. It is to gain a sense of one’s own value; and to this Christians would also add that it is to know and experience the love and calling of God. This is what we read in our passage from the Epistle to the Ephesians. “ I pray that, according to the riches of God’s glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.”

“Rooted and grounded in love ” This is our message. This is also the message we read in the examples of service we have heard of this morning, and this must be the driving force of all that we seek to do in and for the church, and for the world in the place to which God has drawn us. As the writer to the Ephesians says, “ it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

What an astounding thought! How challenging – but also how empowering in the Spirit. We have heard of some of these “good works” this morning; “works” either begun in this place or by others, from outside, who share our wish to help and heal those in need. “Good works”,_even if we would shy away from such a term today, for *they* are “good” : they tend towards the increase of “life in all

its fullness” for people whose lives have been stunted or damaged, and we need to recognize and support goodness where we see it in this world.

As for us, members of this church, it is also how Evangelism meets Service. The two must go together, for service - or stewardship, to use a current term - is faith expressed and shown in action. After all, a steward is only a servant, using the particular gifts or skills he or she has

been given for the purposes of their master; and there is nobody who doesn't have a gift or skill, even if some of them may seem to their owners very humble. “Oh, there's nothing I can do...” we may say, but that is never true. Just ask someone and they will tell you what you can do.

“For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do” those *works*, that service which He calls us to; and God never calls us to something beyond our abilities or strength or age. There is always a place where even the apparently humblest gift will be received and used as part of the purposes of God. Moreover, in God's hands it will be multiplied: it will work for the good, the fullness of life of both receiver and giver. It grows; it is strengthened. In the words from Ephesians, again, “I pray that , according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit”.

I love this Epistle. It is so gloriously inspiring, speaking from the known experience of the writer (who may or may not have been Paul) so what can I do but end with his words, words written for all of us , whoever we are. “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ, that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God”.

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.”

Janet Bottoms: 17th May 2026