

I am the Good Shepherd, Easter IV 2018

You would probably be quite shocked to see a wolf wandering around Abbots Langley, with a hungry and dangerous look in his eye.

I think I've heard tell that there's someone out Kings Langley direction that has one as a pet. And last year Elvis, Moby, Sting and Lemmy, four little wolf cubs, were brought from Sweden to make them home in Devon. They live in a reserve at the moment but are part of a project to reintroduce wolves England: a project which may or may not get the go-ahead. Lots of people remain thoroughly unconvinced, especially farmers. Most think it was a thoroughly good thing when Henry VII finally won England's wolf wars. No hunting bans in those days: wolves were not considered noble and romantic, but savage destroyers and killers. The good folk of Abbots Langley will have been deeply relieved when told that the last one had been hunted down, and the threat was no more.

Unsurprisingly, today's Gospel is not talking about that kind of wolf. Jesus might well have seen real wolves, but he uses them as a symbol, a way of talking about all those dark and threatening things, those beasts which fancy their chances against us, which eye us with a view to snatching and scattering, killing and eating. We may not have actual wolves wandering the streets, but what they stand for, we should know well. We see them all the time.

You see them in the kind of stupid individualism, of contempt for community, that lies behind – for instance – people vandalising defibrillators around a village?

Or in the sexual chaos and selfishness which this week, we're told, produced a new breed of super-gonorrhoea, a gruesome infection which has finally outstripped the power of our antibiotics.

Or in the anxiety and misery and depression which seem to afflict so many, sometimes for obvious reasons, sometimes not so, but always draining out the life and joy.

And then the Great Wolf behind them all, Death. Paul calls it somewhere the last enemy. We have this deep down fear that even when people die well, at the end of good lives, there is just the breaking down of all that had been built up, the disintegration of love and goodness. In the end, it seems we are all sucked into the final blackness.

I am the good shepherd, says the Lord Jesus. I see the wolf coming, and I lay down my life for the sheep.

When Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross, he was taking on the wolves. He had seen them, prowling around all his people. He'd watched them snatching and scattering, wreaking their havoc, devouring lives.

And the whole mystery of our faith is this: that Jesus knew the one way to end it all, to end the wolf-wars, was to *let them win*. To let the wolves win, let them leap on him and devour him. Let them drag him down into their lair, into the darkest ruin where all their victims lie.

That's what the Cross means: it is Jesus going into the darkest, deadliest, most ruined place imaginable. The place the wolves come from, the place where hope ends. The place where the most cursed of our dead have gone.

And what the Resurrection means – and why we have this reading during Eastertide – is that *right there*, right at the heart of the wolves' lair, *right there*, Jesus is still Jesus. The wolves have done their worst, and Jesus is still Jesus. *Nothing* can stop him doing what Jesus does: doing what he always did – loving, forgiving, starting again, breathing new life.

If that doesn't make much sense, try thinking of it this way.

Think of those idiots vandalising defibrillators. Think of the people you know lost in depression: think, perhaps, of yourself in your darkest moments. Think, in the end, of death.

Now imagine that all of life was like that. That those things had grown so big, so overwhelming, that there was no room for anything else. There was just stupidity, selfishness, despair. Maybe, if we are lucky, we might just vanish into blackness. Maybe, if we are not, we might have to endure that, *feel that*, pointless darkness, forever.

The Gospel is: we don't.

We don't, because Jesus of Nazareth has gone into the darkness first, and the darkness has not overcome him. He has gone into the darkness, and he is still Jesus, still doing what He does. Selfishness, stupidity, despair – even death – these wolves have had their fangs broken. They don't get to win. They don't get to devour any of us. Because Jesus is there. He is looking after us, and He is the Good Shepherd.

This is the Gospel: because of Jesus, not one of us – not one – has to get eaten by a wolf. Not one of us is doomed: no matter how selfish, how stupid, how desperate - no matter (in the end) how dead. Jesus is alive: alive and ready to touch every single one of us, whoever and wherever we are. Ready to love, forgive, to start again. Because of him, the wolves have lost. There'll be no howling in triumph over *these* bodies. That's the Gospel, and so we give thanks to God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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