

Trinity 7 2021 – 18th July

9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton	Jeremiah 23 vv 1-6 p782 Ephesians 2 vv 11-22 p1174
11.00 Holy Communion Halling	Mark 6 vv 30-56 p1009

LORD of all power and might, who art the author and giver of all good things; Graft in our hearts the love of thy Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of thy great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Mark 6³⁴: *And Jesus, when he came out, saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd: and he began to teach them many things.*

According to the *Times*, a fifth of adults under 35 say that they have only one close friend or no close friends at all. Why should that be? I'm sure that these surveys need to be taken with a pinch of salt. There is no way that they could be scientifically accurate. There are too many parameters. Who was asked to take part in the survey? What do you mean by a close friend? When were people asked out about what friends they might have?

It's not all together surprising, however, if there is a lot of loneliness in the world. The day I wrote this sermon someone told me, at around half past eleven this morning, that I was the first person she had spoken to that day. I replied that she was probably the first person I had spoken to too. A lot of us live on our own. Young adults, moving away from the places in which they grew up in order to go to university or to find a job may find it difficult to make new friends – perhaps living in lonely flats or bedsits, distant from where the people they work with live and sometimes in insalubrious neighbourhoods where you would think twice about going out on your own.

If we have our goods delivered to the door, we don't meet people in the shops. Even before COVID, pubs and other establishments in which people have traditionally met were in decline. Homes are more comfortable than they used to be. There is plenty of home entertainment. We don't have to go out and meet people. We can manage fine indoors. Older people may be afraid to be out on the streets at night. Younger people seem to be increasingly relying on the internet to meet one another, rather than meeting in person. They're less likely to hang about on street corners and in the park, bored and looking for something to do – only too often getting into mischief. In some ways, this has been a good thing. Drunkenness has declined among young adults. There are fewer teenage pregnancies.

There are nevertheless plenty of reasons to be concerned about what teenagers and children and older people see online. But apart from that, if all our online interactions were as pure as the driven snow, could they really be regarded as substitutes for actually meeting face to face and in the flesh? I don't do social media but I do doubt that having large numbers of online friends whom one never meets can be as good as having real friends you actually do things with – real friends in the real world. Online or on the 'phone is better than nothing, and it may be all that is possible because our friends live far away or because of emergencies like COVID, but it's not the same. Similarly, I think Church online is a good thing for people who cannot actually make it to church, but I don't think that it can be a substitute for actually

attending in the flesh if you possibly can to enjoy fellowship with other worshippers, to pray together, to sing together, to hear the Word and to participate in the Sacraments.

Sheep without a shepherd. I sometimes think of our Lord's words when the lives of the people around me and the people I read and hear about seem to lack any meaningful direction and purpose. Back in 1965, a well known Kentish musical ensemble released a song, "I can't get no satisfaction." Apparently, it refers both to sex and to materialism. You wouldn't expect a double negative in a composition by grammar school boys unless they were deliberately making a point, as I expect they were. "I can't get no satisfaction." I get the impression that, for many people, the words are true. They can't get no satisfaction. Nothing really satisfies a very large proportion of the human race – the overwhelming majority I suspect: - not relationships; not material possessions; not wealth, power or status; not victory in battle; not artistic creativity; not sporting achievement; not literature. Some of these goals are good. Some are bad. If we can achieve our good goals we are going some way towards our personal fulfilment. But, even so, we shall never be fully satisfied. In some ways it is good that we are never fully satisfied in this life. Everything in this mortal realm is to some degree imperfect and it is right that we should continue to strive to make things better. But we shall never achieve perfection by our efforts. We will never live a perfect life in our own strength. We may make our bit of the world a better place if we try, but we shall never succeed in making it perfect.

And it seems to me that the goals many people strive for are not really worth the effort at all. They are very far from capable of giving us any ultimate satisfaction. Like the crowds in our Gospel story, the crowds on the streets of Britain are *like sheep without a shepherd*. But, it doesn't have to be like that. There is a Good Shepherd. Life does have an ultimate meaning and purpose. It has direction. The end of life – its purpose and its finish – is eternal love in Christ, in God the Father, enwrapped in the Holy Spirit. Our Good Shepherd supplies our real needs. He is with us in all the storms of life. He is present with us to heal us from all our sicknesses. I feel like I'm being horribly superior when I suggest that many people lack meaningful purpose and direction in their lives, that the goals they strive for cannot ultimately give them satisfaction. I don't mean to be. When Jesus saw the crowds milling about seeking they knew not what He had compassion on them. He had compassion on you and me and brought us into His fold. He has compassion on His other sheep which are not yet of this fold. If we truly follow Jesus, we don't condemn the people of the world; we have compassion on them. We are entrusted with a treasure, the good news that the Good Shepherd loves every single human being, that He will protect and guide us in our lives, that He will sustain us with everything that we need for eternal life, that He is our companion in all our troubles and the answer to all our prayers and that He will bring us home to His eternal Kingdom. All that we have to do is to repent and to believe.

Psalm 23. *Dominus regit me.*

THE Lord is my shepherd : therefore can I lack nothing. 2. He shall feed me in a green pasture : and lead me forth beside the waters of comfort. 3. He shall convert my soul : and bring me forth in the paths of righteousness, for his Name's sake. 4. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil : for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me. 5. Thou shalt prepare a table before me against them that trouble me : thou hast anointed my head with oil, and my cup shall be full. 6. But thy loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life : and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.