



Our school vision

'I am the good shepherd and I know my sheep and my sheep know me.'

The Gospel according to John, chapter 10 verse 14

This is the single sentence from the Bible which we chose to represent the vision which is at the heart of our community. What follows are some notes to help us unpack the meaning of the sentence and see how it informs our vision statement, motto, values, policies, and common life.

Some of us will share the Christian faith, others may not be sure, and some may firmly reject it; but we hope that everyone can take inspiration from a model of human community which flows from this faith and so share our vision for our school.

1) The **Good** Shepherd

'Good' is the most common English word used to translate the word Jesus uses to describe what kind of shepherd he is. The original Greek word, however, is much richer in meaning. It can mean 'good' in our sense of 'exemplary': Jesus is the kind of shepherd who ticks all the boxes a shepherd should tick, a role model among shepherds, a shepherd with the proper skills and experience. But the word also means 'noble', and the basic meaning of the word is actually 'beautiful' or 'attractive'. So Jesus' goodness is a goodness not just of skill, but also of character: it's about who Jesus fundamentally *is*, not what he knows or can do.

A noble/beautiful/good shepherd would be a shepherd for whom the sheep came first and who would protect the weak, feed the hungry, tend the sick and injured, and literally live alongside the sheep. For sheep, shepherds like that are very attractive!

2) The Good **Shepherd**

In the imagery and symbolism of the Jewish tradition God was frequently described as being like a shepherd to the people (from *Genesis*, through the *Psalms*, to the prophets, particularly *Ezekiel*).

It was common in the ancient near east to describe human rulers as shepherds of their people, but the Jewish tradition tended to regard human leaders as poor shepherds and as, actually or potentially, usurpers of the role and relationship which only God could and should have with humanity. Although Israel did come to have kings, it was a development which was long resisted and regarded as very risky. Jewish people thought that God should be regarded as the only true shepherd and any human model of leadership had to start with that truth, rather than by appropriating a role which only God could have.

So the *only* 'good shepherd' is God, and when Jesus says 'I am the good shepherd' he is effectively saying 'I am your God'. The original Greek (the language the *Gospel of John* was written in) emphasises the words 'I am', and it's important to remember that 'I am' is the literal meaning of the Hebrew name for God, 'Yahweh'.

3) **I know my sheep**

Shepherds knew their sheep individually, giving them names which the sheep recognised, much as we do with dogs. But the word 'know' is about much more than naming and recognising. A shepherd in Jesus' day would know most of the sheep from birth to death, spending every day out in the hills with them, knowing them like we know our closest family and friends.

A shepherd also cared about the sheep, and in Christian thinking the two words 'know' and 'love' are often regarded as meaning the same thing: you cannot truly love someone you do not know, and you cannot truly know someone and not love them (if we are indifferent to someone or hostile, we usually have a very one dimensional view of them; it's hard, though not impossible, really to hate someone you know well and understand, even when they are very annoying). So here Jesus affirms that his relationship with the people is exactly what you would expect God's relationship with us to be, and not at all like that of many human 'leaders': he knows and loves us.

4) **Sheep**

The sheep of the Bible are not much like the sheep we see in lowland England today. The closest modern breed to the biblical sheep is probably the Awassi, a common variety of fat-tailed sheep found throughout the near east. These sheep are particularly hardy and resilient, tolerant of extremes of temperature, capable of

travelling great distances over rough terrain, and able to survive in drought conditions (with a fat reserve in the tail). They are multi-coloured: white with brown head and legs usually.



Like all other sheep, they are also intelligent, brave, and highly social animals: more or less the exact opposite of the image most of us have of sheep! They know and recognise their shepherd, respond to the shepherd's call, but also retain a determined individuality (think terrier rather than border collie!).



When we think about the image of sheep and shepherd as a model for Christian community it's important to know about the actual sheep and shepherds which Jesus and the writers of the Old Testament had in mind. At least three things come from that model:

Called to be resilient

First, we, as the 'flock', are expected to be tough, independent-minded, resilient individuals in a community which looks to follow the lead of Jesus, with whom we try to develop the intimate bond which exists between each sheep and its shepherd. We are not being asked to be stupid, unquestioning, weak, helpless, inactive,

passive, or blind followers of some human authority figure, still less of a deity who is aloof and distant, or expects us to serve the deity. The surprising truth, which many Christians forget, is that the creator of the cosmos kneels before each of us in humble service, and does not ask us for anything in return.

Called to shepherd one another

Second, people in positions of authority (adults among children, the senior leadership team, or governors) are always sheep like the rest of us, and the roles they fulfil are about serving the common good, not about taking God's place or 'being in charge' (which, as just noted, not even God tries to be).

Society at large may push us to use hierarchical leadership language, but we should always remember that, for us, the headteacher, for example, is not the 'boss', but the servant of the servants of the children: an enabler, supporter, encourager, nurturer, problem solver, and bearer of wisdom. Down the years Christian communities have sometimes lost their grip on this model, and even become abusive, but it remains a truth which inspires reform and calls out the abuse of authority.

Called to share love

Third, knowing God, and recognising that every individual is known and loved by God, is at the heart of Christian spirituality. Knowing one another, building communities in which everyone can feel safe, and living as sister/brother to each other is what should follow from that awareness of the love of God.

All our policies and every aspect of the way we treat each other should flow from this basic sense of a community in which the important people are the 'lambs', those who are for whatever reason most vulnerable.

Our vision statement

We are inspired to be a vibrant, joyful community in which we know and love one another, leading together and growing together by:

- **Appreciating everyone and everything around us**
- **Making one another feel safe**
- **Sharing, so no one feels left out**
- **Living well together in love**
- **Moving forward together in hope**

'Inspiration'

We used this word for two reasons:

First, we wanted to capture the reality that our community is not yet, and never will be, perfect. Our vision is partially realised, but we're still working towards its completion. It wouldn't be true to say 'we are' the community we describe, but equally it wouldn't be true to say that our vision is only about the future and doesn't yet show in school life day to day.

Second, we wanted to use a word which could include everyone, whether or not each person shares the Christian faith. We would like this vision to inspire everyone in our school, from any faith or world-view. Our community is meant to be open and inclusive, so it is always important to make room for everyone and avoid excluding anyone.

'Joyful'

Joy is one of those words people use in too limited a sense. We tend to think it means the opposite of sad or sorrowful, but actually, certainly for Christians, the word is meant to be deeper than that.

It is possible to be joyful and profoundly sad at the same time. Joy is not just about laughter and smiles, it's the feeling that goes with knowing 'many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it' (*Song of Solomon 8.7*). In other words, no matter what goes wrong, nor how tragic a turn life may take, when we are known and loved, we can receive the strength and support to get up again and keep on living and giving.

When we are loved, we can have hope; when we have hope, we can experience joy. Joy is what it feels like to be truly alive: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'
John 10.10

Leading together and growing together

These words flow from our sense that we are all sheep of God's flock. Leadership in human terms is shared between us, and not just among the adults. We recognise that even the youngest child in nursery can point us in the right direction and show us something we had never seen before.

We grow by sharing responsibility and supporting one another, and we want the children to grow by learning to take on responsibility and having their contribution recognised and valued. We then expanded on that basic idea through the five bullet points, five key ways in which we can live out our vision. It's from these points that our values, aims, and policies flow.

Love

This is a word used in many different ways, so we need to be clear about how we intend to use it. For Christians 'love' is defined by the way in which God relates to the world, and that

is shown most clearly in the life of Jesus, and above all by the crucifixion (so Good Friday is 'good' because it's the day which shows us what love is all about, and that we are truly loved by God). We've already made the connection above between knowing and loving. Love is hard to put into words, but some key points about Christian use of the word are:

- Love is about a total focus on someone else, caring, and making someone else matter to us so much that it involves forgetting oneself (so despite modern ideas to the contrary, to love yourself is simply impossible, a contradiction in terms)
- Love is about delighting in someone else, marvelling at them, being lost in awe and wonder at everything about them (which is what 'appreciating everyone and everything around us' is pointing us towards)
- Love is about giving and service, and finding that when you give to those you love, you find a fulfilment you could never find in any other way

'Love your neighbour **as** yourself' (*Mark 12.31*, with parallel passages in *Luke* and *Matthew*, and see also *Romans 13.9*, *Galatians 5.14*, *1 Corinthians 10.24*, and *John 13.34*) means 'love your neighbour **in place of** yourself', it doesn't mean 'love yourself and then extend that self-love to other people', though you will hear people say otherwise!

Of course, that does not mean that Christians don't do personal wellbeing, or don't try to live healthily, and don't have holidays. The Christian view is that since none of us has the capacity to give endlessly, we need to have the humility to rest, recover, and heal, if we're to love at all.

It also does not mean that Christians are supposed to be down on themselves all the time. That would be a form of self-obsession, like endlessly staring in a mirror and finding fault, a habit that makes it hard to love. Christians are meant to get over themselves, throw the mirrors away, know themselves to be loved just as they are by God (and probably by other people too!), and then focus on other people.

Fundamentally prayer and worship are about building a relationship with God in which we can receive from God in order to give to others; or to use another metaphor, prayer is about becoming a channel through which God's love can flow into the world (and a way of letting go of the fear and insecurity which blocks off the love).

'For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.' *Matthew 16.25*

Or as the well-known Franciscan prayer puts it:

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

To be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand;

To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.