May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts and minds be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today has come to be known as Good Shepherd Sunday. It’s the day, as our Archbishop described in her letter earlier this week, when we, pray for vocations to ministry, and for the care and leadership exercised by all people in the home, government, school, or workplace. It is also an occasion the church gives thanks particularly for those who serve those enduring poverty, sickness, homelessness, and other need. This afternoon at 2 pm Archbishop Anne will offer a livestreamed blessing from the portico of Bishophurst. It can be viewed on the Diocesan FaceBook page ‘Diocese of Algoma: Shaped by a Living Hope.

The theme of a Good Shepherd is reflected in our lections beginning with Psalm 23, which is attributed to David, shepherd boy turned king. It describes how the sheep are dependent upon the shepherd for the things they need for their well being - good pasture, enough water and safe pathways. It describes how Yahweh or God provides for us, his sheep, the things we need as we trust in him is times when all is good and in times when all feels scary and uncertain.

In John’s gospel, Jesus describes Himself with a number of ‘I AM’ statements:
I am the bread of life;
I am the light of the world.
I am the resurrection and the life.
I am the true vine.
I am the good shepherd.
I am the way, the truth, and the life.

In today’s gospel, Jesus says ‘I am the gate.’ Now, if we step back for a moment, we remember that when Moses was being sent from the mountain and the burning bush to God’s people in Egypt, he asked ‘who will I tell them has sent me?’ and the answer? – ‘tell them, I AM sent you’. So, these I AM statements from Jesus that we find in John’s gospel, not only give tangible descriptions of Jesus but they also clearly identify him as God.

We read and listen as Jesus speaks to the crowd gathered around the man who was born blind and then to the Pharisees who have overheard him. Jesus tells them ‘anyone who doesn’t enter the sheep gate but climbs in (sneaks in) by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep… the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger… because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ There was a story told by a sociologist who spent time in Israel doing research: one day, out in the countryside he observed three separate flocks of sheep, each with their shepherd converging at an oasis where there was water and shade. As they came together, the flocks mingled as they had a drink and some lush grass and then laid in the shade and rested. The shepherds chatted and ate their lunch and rested as well.
After a while, one of the shepherds stood and wrapped his scarf around himself, picked us his staff and took a few steps out of the crowd of sheep and called Menah! As they heard his call, his flock roused from their lazy sleep and followed him off, away from the rest. Soon afterward the second shepherd did the same and likewise his sheep separated from the crowd and followed him. The sociologist was most intrigued. He approached the remaining shepherd and his flock and asked ‘how do you teach them to do that?’ ‘Oh, we don’t have to teach them said the shepherd the just know what to do when they are called, they follow the shepherd.’

When we are baptized, we become ‘people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand’. Jesus is speaking of us, his sheep, that he is calling out, listening to his voice and following him, doing his work in the world, living by his example and looking to him. A few years ago, Archbishop Anne told of a letter she had received from our then Primate, Fred Hiltz, shortly after her election as bishop. She had told him about feeling overwhelmed with the responsibility of being a bishop, of being a shepherd. He said ‘Just put your trust in God and go ahead with the work’. (repeat)

She went on to say that ‘the work’ is not actually that of the bishop, or that of the clergy or that of the people, but the work belongs to God and it is accomplished thru us all who are ‘sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever’. She said ‘In Baptism, God claims us as God’s beloved children. In that moment of being sealed in the name of the triune God we are
linked with God and with God’s family of faith in the Church, the Body of Christ, in the world. We are incorporated into God’s mission and God’s work as part of that membership. It’s all God’s mission. It’s all God’s work.’ The words ‘just trust in God and go ahead with the work’ are for all of us.

It occurs to me that some of that work is for us to go ahead with here and now in the midst of the concern and uncertainty of this pandemic. Some of the work is caring for ourselves and others by staying home and staying safe. Some of the work is keeping ourselves as mentally fit as we can by practicing gratefulness and by not allowing ourselves to spiral down before asking for help. Some of that work is praying for front line workers who put themselves at risk so we can stay safe and praying for those affected by COVID-19. Some of that work is praying for our leaders and the leaders of the world as they make many important decisions that will have impact on so many. Some of that work is being generous as we are able to support food banks and other causes supporting those in great need. All of that work is listening to the voice of our shepherd as he guides and leads us through uncertain pathways and trusting in him for the needs of our well-being. In all of this we need to ‘trust in God and go ahead with the work’ as he offers to us salvation and abundant life.

By the way… there’s more to the sociologist’s story. ‘Will the sheep follow me?’ he asked the shepherd. ‘Try it’ came the reply. So, the sociologist took the shepherd’s scarf and wrapped it around his head and took the staff in his hand and shouted ‘Menah, menah!’ The sheep continued to rest in the shade paying no
attention what so ever. ‘They will not follow you because they don’t know your voice but they know you are not their shepherd! They’ll only listen to you when they’re sick – then the silly creatures will follow anyone’. My brothers and sisters, trust in God, trust in your shepherd and go ahead with him in his work. Amen.