

Bishop Karen's Sermon for 3rd May 4th Sunday of Easter

Acts 2: 42 - end

John 10: 1 – 10

Seeing things Through a New Lens

In some parts of the world today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. It's an image that brings solace to many. I can very well remember pictures adorning my Sunday School classroom of Jesus as the Good Shepherd with a sheep across his shoulders and surrounded by children. The 23rd Psalm, the Shepherd's Psalm, is used to comfort those who have lost loved ones. The illustration of the shepherd is so appropriate, as the good shepherd offers us a safe refuge from a world filled with thieves, robbers and wolves (and viruses) who are trying to destroy us. The great shepherd is our constant protector, always on guard and who does not sleep.

A shepherd was looking after his sheep one day on the side of a deserted road, when suddenly a brand-new racing car screeches to a halt. The driver, dressed in a designer suit, designer shoes, designer sunglasses, designer watch, and a designer tie, gets out and asks the shepherd, 'If I can tell you how many sheep you have, will you give me one of them?'

The shepherd looks at the young man and then looks at the large flock of sheep grazing and replies 'Okay'. The young man parks the car, connects his laptop to his mobile, enters a NASA website, scans the ground using his GPS, opens a database with 60 excel tables with logarithms and pivot tables and then prints out a 150-page report on his high-tech mini-printer. He turns to the shepherd and says, 'You have exactly 1,586 sheep here.'

Rather surprised the shepherd says, 'That's correct, you can have your sheep.' The young man takes the animal and puts it in the back of his car. Just as the man is about to drive off, the shepherd asks him: 'If I guess your profession, will you return my animal to me?' The young man answers 'Yes, why not?' The shepherd says, 'You are an IT consultant'. 'How did you know?' asks the young man. 'Very simple' answers the shepherd 'Firstly you came here without being called. Secondly you charged me a fee to tell me something I already knew, and thirdly you don't understand anything about my business. Now please can I have my dog back?'

Looking after sheep is no simple task. It is reassuring that at this time God gives us a picture of our great shepherd, who tells us that we will not want, that we will have the best pastures and water and be restored in our souls. We have the sense of peace that he is our guide because he loves us and will not leave us. There is a certainty that this shepherd walks with us all our lives and that we shall be with him forever. In fact, he views us all as royalty, anointing each of our heads with oil and promises that we will dwell in his house forever.'

We are in the Easter season and therefore continue to reflect on what it means to be a community of the resurrection. One of the things we must learn at the beginning of this season is that 'life after death' is not the only message for the Easter miracle. The central message of Easter is that God's reign has begun in a new and unexpected way and that the eternal life we hope for after death can actually be lived here and now too, and so alongside the gospel passages, our biblical readings from the Book of Acts focus on stories about the community that formed around the risen Christ.

It is hard for us, still in lockdown, to imagine how the Christian community will look after this time of Covid 19. How can we embrace those who are zooming in or viewing us from afar? How will we build on the advantages of gathering people on-line across a wide area for fellowship and learning? Will we pay more attention to our values and how we live them out? What will it mean for the

church to be a distinctive and visible group of people at the centre of community life instead of relying on a recognisable building in the middle of it? How will we enable our communities to come alongside and express how they are feeling about all that has happened? How shall we sustain our currently models and patterns of ministry working collaboratively and valuing those who minister to us? These are all good questions for us to be thinking about in the coming weeks and months and questions which our gospel readings can help us with as we move from Easter to Ascension and Pentecost.

In doing so it is important to acknowledge two things, to remember that the early church community fully expected Christ's return any day and because of this they acted in a particular way in the certainty that the end was near. However, it was not long before the community realised that certain aspects of such a lifestyle were neither wise, nor sustainable for the long term. They had to re-think how to be followers of Christ and still maintain existence in the world. That too is relevant for us as we think ahead for the future. It is good to have many opportunities currently to connect and worship in new ways, however we will need to decide what practices do we continue and what are for now only?

We also need to remember that the early Christian community lived differently from those around them and were seen differently by their neighbours and associates. They were distinctive. Eventually those Christians were openly and severely persecuted and some had to go underground. For many people, choosing to follow Christ, became a very costly proposal. Perhaps it is too easy for us today to concentrate on the well-meaning nature of our Christian witness, rather than to stand up and speak up for our faith? One of the phrases that I remember from Bonhoeffer is that he implied that the real church would be small, for when it comes to it there will not be many who will stand up for Christ. What a challenge!

So, some pointers for now and for the future. The first thing which I notice about these passages is that the Church is called to have a clear identity. We are people who follow in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth and we worship the one he called 'Father', the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, of Jacob and Rachel. Last week's reading from the Book of Acts placed a great deal of importance on baptism as a sign of the activity of the Spirit of God. Today's passage is a subtle but almost certain reference to what we call Holy Communion, the breaking of bread together much as Jesus taught them during his life. Long after the experience at Emmaus the disciples continued to recognise Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Isn't it interesting therefore that in this current crisis how we break bread together is an important point of discussion? I am pleased that people have been joining online around Holy Communion, a distinctive part of our life together however, we all acknowledge that it is not the same as when we are physically together.

We also notice from the reading from the Book of Acts that at this time the early Christians continued their association with the temple and all that involved. They still saw themselves as an integral part of the people of Israel and it was not until later that the church and synagogue went their separate ways 'Having accepted the old, they also embraced the new, and the transformation of their lives was expressed in their worship as well as their relationship with their neighbours.'

The second thing I notice is the importance to us as Christians to know the call of the great Shepherd amidst all the other callers who vie for our attention and loyalty. H V Moreton in his wonderful book, 'In the Steps of the Master' writes this 'Early one morning I saw an extraordinary sight not far from Bethlehem. Two shepherds had evidently spent the night with their flocks in a cave. The sheep were all mixed together, and the time had come for the shepherds to go in different directions.

One of the shepherds stood some distance from the sheep and began to call. First one, then the other, then four or five animals ran towards him; and so on until he had counted his whole flock.'

There are two types of shepherd mentioned in our gospel. The good shepherd and the hireling. The hireling was paid to be a shepherd. He has no connection with the sheep, no relationship. Who is the hired hand? There may have been here a subtle judgement on false leaders who used the sheep for their own gain, and an echo of Ezekiel 34 where the faithless shepherds of Israel feed themselves instead of the flock. The picture of the hired hand primarily serves though as a foil for the self-giving shepherd. His flight from danger sharpens the picture of the one whose care for the sheep proves costly.

There are many voices that call today. It is for us to discern the call of our shepherd from those of others who seek their flocks or those who would take us in another direction. Those calls sound both genuine and compelling, but upon further consideration and investigation do not represent the true spirit of the Christian faith. The good shepherd guards the sheep with his very life because he sees them as his own.

Thirdly, the life of faith is a gift we receive (or reject). Our life begins in God, in God's good intent and in God's utter reliability. Our calling is to receive, accept, trust and respond. The relationship between shepherd and sheep is, primarily, a relationship of trust. The shepherd does for the sheep what the sheep cannot do for themselves. The shepherd is always alert, looking ahead, planning and making provision. The sheep are amazed and grateful for the attentiveness of the shepherd. God is the quintessential shepherd making possible the life that we cannot find for ourselves.

This idyllic life is interrupted from time to time, by times of danger, when the sheep are required to go through the darkest valley. They do so, not because they are stupid, but because they utterly trust the shepherd. They know the danger, but they also know that the shepherd will not leave them.

It doesn't take much imagination to see why the early church found the metaphor of the good shepherd so powerful. In a life lived in jeopardy, under the threat of enemies every day, like the sheep they trusted the shepherd and found that they were indeed safe.

Fourthly, to live as a Christian is also to be open to being transformed by the call of the one we have come to know. Transformation is the essence of the Christian life. Great changes happen to all of us in our relationship with God. Not easily, of course. We may suffer sickness and grief, we may experience anxiety and pain, and then one day, amid our brokenness there is a sliver, or maybe a burst of light. God is closer than ever before.

There is a mandate here that calls us to love as he loves us. It is a commandment to know, value, honour and protect one another and to share with one another the riches of God's bounty. If Christ is recognised by his care then we, his sheep, are recognised by ours. The same self-giving, that same unity, but also that unashamed proclamation of God's victory over death.

To live this life fully in our day and age goes completely against the grain of our individualistic and materialistic culture. Hopefully, some of that is being challenged at the present time, however our calling is immense, and we should be preparing for it. The good shepherd was put to death and the faithful shepherd's claim on our lives is one that calls us to live courageously. The witness of the resurrection is that courageous living is possible because fear no longer has power. We need not fear the sense of loss when we live by the hand of providence. We need not fear dying when eternal life is God's promise and we need not fear the opinion of those who do not believe, when our mission is to bring the presence and the good news of the risen and triumphant Christ directly into their midst with the promise that all can have this life and have it abundantly.

