

Easter 4 John 10:22-30

We have come to the 4th Sunday of Easter and find our gospel reading has nothing to say about post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, in fact the gospel reading has nothing to say about resurrection at all, the only mention of it is in the reading from Acts and that is in relation to a miraculous raising from the dead of a Christian by Peter. No, Today's readings have sheep and shepherds as their theme, and this week in the calendar has become known as good shepherd Sunday.

The image we have of Jesus as the good shepherd is an idyllic one, a man in the countryside with a crook surrounded by well-behaved sheep, which may be slightly prone to stupidity from time to time. But it's ok because Jesus, the good shepherd will save the silly sheep from getting lost, falling down crevices, wolf attack and any number of other dangers because that's what he does and it's all very lovely, The lord is my shepherd, says the psalmist, he makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.

But the reality of the response Jesus got when he first likened himself to a good shepherd was anything but idyllic! It started the feast of the dedication, we are told, which is a festival more commonly known to us as Hanukkah. It's easy to remember the date as it falls on the 25th day of the Jewish month of Chislev which is roughly the same as December. The festival began in the year 167 BC and came 3 years after Antiochus Epiphanes had invaded Jerusalem and defiled the temple. The invasion hadn't lasted, though, a resistance under the leadership of Judas Maccabaeus won the day and because of the courage and religious devotion of this leader and his intent to liberate and re-consecrate the temple, he was made a king and despite not being a descendent of David his dynasty ruled for a hundred years. It was overthrown by the Romans who installed Herod the great as a sympathiser king, but even he saw the value of lineage and married a princess from Judas Maccabaeus' family to lend credence to his claim.

So, at the time of Jesus, the celebration of Hanukkah was not only a celebration of former liberation and the value of the temple, but it was about kings and how people became kings in their culture. As we understand this we can appreciate that when Jesus arrived at the temple that day speaking of his role as a leader who would be as a good shepherd he wasn't looking to concoct an idyllic scene to calm the minds of those who heard him, but rather he was issuing a challenge and those listening heard it. If you are the messiah, tell us, they plead, they hear what he is implying but they will not take the leap of faith themselves, they want Jesus to say plainly "I am the messiah, you must follow me" but Jesus doesn't invade our lives in that way.

Jesus shepherds those who choose to hear his call and respond to it. He doesn't demand our love, love demanded is not love at all. Just like the people chose Judas Maccabaeus as their king in response to his great deeds, because following him they felt safe and secure, so it is with Jesus, we must choose him as our king, he will not take our devotion by force

If this wasn't enough for those who were listening to Jesus, and let's not forget he was very nearly stoned after he finished talking, he goes on to explain that the reason not everyone believes in him is because some of them are simply not his sheep. That is a difficult statement to take and it is a line of theology that has been and can still be very damaging to others. Jesus says, my sheep hear my voice and know me because the father has given them to me, it is a statement that suggests a level of pre-destination. We are in or out based on what God has already determined. It is a dangerous train of thought because taken to its natural conclusion there is nothing that changes our in/out status, it is all God's choice, and if we can find a way to determine who is in or out we can stick with the in crowd and exclude those outside, because what difference do they make, they are rejected by God.

But, this is not only dangerous, it is also a deeply flawed reading of the text. That God is a part of our coming to faith is not really something we can dispute, but the text doesn't say God gave Jesus those sheep once and for all, there is nothing to say more sheep are not called and invited all the time. And in any case, how could we ever begin to recognise another sheep of Jesus' flock? What criteria would we place on membership because our experience tells us that we would be at pretty high risk of getting it wrong.

Over and over again God calls to his service the small, the overlooked, the unsuitable. Many of us are only too grateful for God's interest in the underdog as we feel it's the only reason he identified us as worth saving, we are in no position to identify a sheep of Jesus' flock by any measure we might follow. We will never be condemned by God for loving. Whatever we think of another person, whatever mistakes we feel they have made, whatever it is about them that we dislike, we can never offend God by loving them. The world might think we are naïve but in the end it is not about what anyone else thinks of us, but God. The role of the shepherd is to bring a flock together, that flock may look like a motley crew at times but each one within it has heard the call and followed the shepherd and no one else has the authority to say they may not be a part of it.

In fact the safest way to approach this text by far is to not worry about everyone else but rather focuses on our own relationship with Jesus. We must ask ourselves such questions as; do I hear his voice and know his voice and follow his voice in trust? Do I choose Jesus as my king, my liberator, my shepherd? Because if I do, then I can have the idyllic image of life as a sheep in Jesus' flock. Then I can lie down in green pastures, I can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear nothing, then I can walk the length of my days confident of the goodness and mercy that will follow me and in the hope that I will remain in the house of the lord for evermore.

Give thanks that the you have heard the voice of the good shepherd in your life and are assured a place within his flock.