

Reflection - Sunday 3rd May
John 10:1-10
Hearing the voice of God, which leads to life

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There is a story of a school inspector who goes to visit a rural village primary school in North Yorkshire, I think it's a story from a Gervase Phinn book but I can't be sure. The school inspector arrives to the school assembly and is invited to address the children, he asks the gathered group of children 'do you have sheep on your farm?' The children look at him somewhat gone out, as if to say, well that's a stupid question to ask. After a few moments one of the children puts his hand up and says 'well we have Swaledales, not any sheep, Swaledale sheep', another child puts his hand up and says 'no one has sheep sir, we all have particular types of sheep'. The inspector quickly moved the subject, having learnt far more than he bargained for and knowing for sure that sheep were not just sheep, sheep were in fact very complicated!

Preaching about sheep and shepherds in Northumberland is just about as risky as a school assembly in North Yorkshire! Sheep are complicated and what always makes me smile about John Chapter 10, is that just like sheep, what at first seems like a straightforward passage is really rather complicated.

Chapter 10 is the nearest that John's gospel gets to a parable or an allegorical story. It follows straight on from chapter 9 where Jesus has had an encounter with the Pharisees, where they ask him 'What? Are we blind too?' (9:40) in response to their interaction after the healing of the man born blind. 10:1 begins 'Very truly I tell you Pharisees' which shows us that what is to follow is a response to that encounter.

Throughout chapter 10, the verses we've heard today and those that follow, what we have constant contrasts between the way of Jesus who says 'I am the gate', 'I am the Good Shepherd', and the way of the thieves, robbers, strangers, hired hands. This contrast is the common theme that runs through the passage.

One of the reasons that the passage is complicated is that its key messages are told in different ways. So in the opening verses we heard today, verses 1 to 6, we hear Jesus speaking to the pharisees through a metaphorical story at the end of which John tells us that the Pharisees didn't understand. Jesus then goes on to make his point in different ways, so in verses 7 to 10 he makes the same points again in an explanation of what he has been trying to say. As we go on to verses 11 to 13 he does the same again but using I am the Good Shepherd rather than I am the Gate, and then the same again in verses 14 to 16 before in verses 17 and 18 we have some theological reasoning for Jesus has been saying.

We can dig deep into this passage and there is much in it which can speak to us as followers of Jesus. But Zoom, I've realised, is not the place for long detailed exegetical sermons! So I encourage you to read John 10 in your own time and to look carefully at all that is there, for it is rich in the love of God and the purposes of Jesus.

For this morning though I want to draw out just 2 thoughts which I believe speak to us at the moment. One on that contrast of who Jesus is compared to the others and then secondly to think about the constant refrain through the passage about the sheep knowing the voice of the shepherd.

As I said earlier throughout the passage Jesus contrasts himself to others who might come to the sheepfold or try to care for the sheep. One of the challenges of the passage is that it isn't easy to understand who Jesus is referring to when he speaks of thieves, robbers, strangers even to other sheep. Is he referring to the pharisees themselves, is he referring to prophets or others who have sought to be the messiah? To some extent who Jesus is referring to is less important, I think, that the contrast he is making. It is the contrast which shows who Jesus is that is more important, it is this contrast that shows us that we can trust Jesus and why we can trust Jesus.

In contrast to the thieves, robbers, strangers Jesus is the one who truly cares, Jesus is the one who knows the sheep and is known by the sheep, Jesus is the one who comes to seek the best for all sheep, Jesus is the one who is the gate to the good things of the sheepfold. Jesus is the one through whom people can be saved, Jesus is the one, the only one, who comes so that everyone can have life and life to the full, life in all its fullness.

As we hear this passage in these weeks after Easter, we are reminded that the great acts of Easter, the death and resurrection of Jesus make being saved, make sharing life in all its fullness a reality. A reality for the Pharisees, a reality for those who heard the story and a reality for all God's people throughout the ages, a reality for you and I.

These contrasts show us that there was no comparison to Jesus then and is no comparison to Jesus now, he is the one who offers salvation to all the world, he is the one that gives us the full life of the Kingdom of God to share in. He is the one who is Good News to the world and keeps offering that Good News, the Good News of life in all its fullness, keep speaking that Good News to us day by day.

At this time more than ever we need to keep hearing the Good News don't we. We need to hear Good News from God that leads to life. Throughout this passage Jesus speaks of how the sheep hear the voice of the shepherd, know the voice of the shepherd, follow the words of the shepherd. v3, 'he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out, v5, they will never follow a stranger, they do not recognise a strangers voice, v8 the sheep have not listened to them (the robbers), v14 I know my sheep and they know me, v16, they too will listen to my voice.

It we recognise that in Jesus we find the Good News, that he continues to be Good News for the world, then like the sheep we need to be listening to the voice of God, the voice of Jesus, the voice of the Holy Spirit. We also need to discern the voices that are not of God and make sure we don't listen to those. When we listen to the voice of God, it leads into life.

At the moment we are surrounded by so many voices, voices on the news, voices in the newspaper, voices from our families, voices of politicians, our own voices in our heads, voices that have spoken

unhelpful things to us in the past that keep coming back to us, voices of ministers (!), friends, house group members, voices of neighbours and work colleagues. So so many voices.

How do we hear the voice of God amongst all the of the voices that we hear, how do we discern between the good news and the bad news? When different voices are making suggestions to us, how do we decide when a voice is a helpful voice speaking of the Kingdom of God and when is a voice not speaking the way of God. How can we be like the sheep in John 10 hearing only the voice of the Good Shepherd and ignoring the voices of the robbers, thieves, strangers?

Amongst all the voices that we are hearing at the moment discerning the voice of the Good Shepherd, the voice of Jesus is so important. Admittedly this isn't always easy, but that doesn't mean it's not important. It would of course be easy if the only way we heard Good News was in prayer, or the only way we heard God's will was directly from Jesus. We all know though, that as the body of Christ, as the family of God, we hear the will of God through one another as well as through prayer and the power of the Spirit.

So how do we discern God's voice, how we do hear the voice of the Good Shepherd in prayer and through one another. For me I have two questions when I want to decide whether a voice I hear, internally or externally is the voice of God. The questions I ask are, firstly 'is what I'm hearing in line with who Jesus is? And secondly, If I follow the voice will it bear the fruit of the Kingdom, will it bear love, joy, peace, hope?

If what I'm hearing is in line with Jesus, if I can see that through it there will be more love, joy, peace, hope (and often but not always I feel at peace with it) then I'm happy to listen to that voice, I'm happy to explore further what it's saying, I'm happy to take the next step, to put what God is asking into action.

If it's not then I say no, I walk away, I leave it to one side - not always easy to do. Sometimes I know I can be cautious but then I know if I'm too cautious God will find another way to speak to me and if I'm being really really cautious God will start yelling! God will come back and prompt another way if we are too cautious but if we follow a stranger, a thief, a robber then there is a lot more turning back to do.

Discerning God's voice isn't always easier and often I think it's easier not to try. But seeking to listen to God, listening for the voice of the Good Shepherd, even if it's a challenge, leads to that life, full life that Jesus has come to bring. At the moment, when life is so challenging, when we are surrounded by so many voices discerning which is God's voice is more important than ever. If we can seek out the voice of God, the words of the Good Shepherd then we will be walking in the best path for us, for our family, for our neighbours, for the world. If we seek and follow the voice of the Good Shepherd we will bring love, hope, peace and joy to the world, we ourselves will be bearers of the Good News. When we are hearing the voice of God, we are being lead to life, full life, life in all its fullness.

So as we enter into this next week, another week of lockdown, another week of shielding, another week or Coronavirus, let us seek to be like the sheep of John 10, let us seek out of the voice of the

Good Shepherd, let us discern that voice amongst all the voices we hear. As we hear the voice of God, the voice of Jesus, the move of the Spirit, let us seek to follow and partner with that voice to bring hope to the world. For if we seek the voice of God, follow the voice of God we will be bearers of Good News, we will be Kingdom builders bringing hope, joy, peace, love to ourselves and to the world.

Let us together seek the voice of God, the voice which leads us into life. Amen.