

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**

**Collect**

Risen Christ,  
faithful shepherd of your Father's sheep:  
teach us to hear your voice  
and to follow your command,  
that all your people may be gathered into one flock,  
to the glory of God the Father.  
Amen.

**Acts 2:42-end**

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

**John 10:1-10**

'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and 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, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

## Sermon

A week and a half ago was, as you know, St. George's Day. At Morning Prayer we remembered a little of the story of St. George, who was martyred for refusing to recant his Christian faith. I spent much of the day chewing over the various readings chosen for St. George's Day, some of which emphasise the importance of following the rules and obeying those in command, while others recognise that sometimes we will face hardship and persecution. St. George's Day is traditionally the day when Scouts across the country renew their promise – there are some wonderful stories of how this was done from homes and front doorsteps across the country this year. It's fascinating that their promise recognises their duty to God, the Queen and one another. Usually, of course, those are not in conflict. But the question St. George himself faced was what to do when they are. And the answer for him was that God comes first.

One thing that I have discovered during this period of lockdown is that I am hearing the scriptures differently. Not in ways that contradict what I have heard before, but rather in ways that provide a different kind of clarity. Today is often referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday, and the gospel reading identifying Jesus as both gate and shepherd of the sheep is a familiar one. There are two aspects of the reading which have particularly resonated. The first is that wonderful reference Jesus makes to the sheep hearing his voice. It's this that takes me back to the example of St. George. The scriptures are clear that we are not to disobey those who lead us for the sake of it. Indeed, they have a clear understanding of rightful authority. And yet we are called to put God first. So, in a world in which there is no scarcity of voices clamouring for our attention, how is it that we ensure that we are attuned to the voice of the Good Shepherd?

I do not regularly watch the daily Covid 19 press briefings, but when I do, I find myself exceptionally impressed by our scientific advisers. In a situation of great uncertainty, they provide a breathtaking clarity, not least because they are not afraid to say what they know, and also what they don't know. What has been clear from the outset is that our government is being guided by scientific advice. And what is equally clear – and it is a point repeated by the scientific advisers, as well as the politicians themselves – is that the decisions lie in the hands of politicians. The scientists advise; and the politicians decide.

It's quite a responsibility, particularly given both the complexity and the unfamiliarity of the current situation. And also particularly when we consider the different ways that this situation impacts on each of us. For some people lockdown is impossibly hard, while for others its impact is much less severe. Our responses are influenced by factors that include our own economic situation, the kind of home we live in, the number of people in our household, our own personality and mental health. To make decisions for the good of such diverse individuals is no easy task. And while nations are seeking to learn from one another, comparisons are quite difficult to make between countries with very different population densities and styles of government.

So what, you might ask, does this have to do with hearing the voice of Jesus the Good Shepherd?

I think the first thing to emphasise is the importance of listening. And that's something we have been reminded of in these current circumstances. Perhaps in more "normal" times, we take it for granted that we are listening carefully. What we are hearing makes sense to us and fits in with our own worldview. But now we have to listen so much more carefully, because we none of us understand the circumstances we are living in. We are all trying to make sense of a rapidly evolving

situation. Even our experts are working things out as they go along. And because the circumstances have changed, we also can't take people's responses for granted. So we need to listen carefully to understand the impact on different individuals. We might find ourselves hearing from people we would not have listened to in the past.

As well as listening, though, we need to remember that line in the gospel reading that tells us that Jesus knows each of us by name. Each one of us has a unique calling and so, alongside the importance of listening carefully to other people, is also the understanding that we may be called to different things. What is right for us may not be right for someone else, and vice versa. Hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd means engaging our whole selves as we listen, discerning our unique calling, as well as remembering that others have unique callings, too.

All of which leads us on to that final verse in today's reading: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Here once again is a verse that I have come to hear differently over these past weeks. In fact my initial response this week was to smile at the irony of speaking of abundant life in a period of lockdown. And yet across the generations, people have heard this invitation to abundant life in so many different circumstances, ranging from persecution and warfare, to physical and mental illness and poverty. The promise of abundant life isn't put on hold while we deal with a pandemic. Rather we come to understand its meaning more fully – and realise that those who have experienced challenges and hardship have a great deal to teach us about what abundant life really means.

There is little doubt that we are all affected by the current restrictions on our daily lives. And many of us are looking forward to the time when they are lifted. Whether our deepest longing is for physical contact, to meet with friends and family or to travel a little further afield, we are all discovering just how much we have tended to take for granted in our daily lives.

But the abundance offered through Jesus transcends our physical situation. Our worldly models of living so often emphasise deficit. We feel like our resources are finite. We place a high value on things that can run out so we expend a great deal of effort preserving them.

Yet abundant life is all about love – and that's something which doesn't run out. There is no shortage. Just because I love one person, doesn't mean I love another less. In fact most of us know that the more we love, the more love we find within ourselves. Abundant life isn't about the things we can have or indeed the places we can go. It is about the love that we can give and receive.

It is rarely easy to have our lives disrupted, and these current circumstances are no exception. And of course for some it is far more than disruption. But for all of us it is also an opportunity to see and hear differently. To listen more carefully to the voice of the Good Shepherd. And to see signs of love in the various places they spring up – and to be part of sharing that love, sharing in the abundant life we are offered.

Amen