



Revd Ro's Reflection on Fourth Sunday of Easter

Year A

Acts 2.42-47

John 10.1-10

A little while ago one of my relatives traced our family tree back from my maternal grandfather. I was delighted to find that they were farmers, farm labourers and shepherds. I was talking to mum about her earliest memories of work on her farm; she can remember her father walking behind a plough up and down the field keeping a straight furrow as the horses strained ahead. She can remember the milking, the men sitting quietly at the cow's side milking by hand. Now huge programmed machines can prepare the ground with no help from the farmer. The machines simply scan the field and the farmer sits in the cab. The cows are milked by machine and sometimes by robots! Mum said how wonderful it was to be able to look back over ninety five years and to have experienced the old ways. So much change in one lifetime. She loves the passage set for today. It must be one of the most famous in the New Testament. It is the first part of Jesus' long pastoral discourse. The second part begins at verse 11 with the line,

¹¹ 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep'.

To us now looking back on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, that line has a huge significance. Jesus is foretelling that he will be the true Passover lamb; he will die to save not only Israel but the whole world. He will win salvation for all who turn to him, as the 'sheep of his pasture.'

This takes place after Jesus had healed the blind man; the Jews are around him listening to his teaching and the leaders and Pharisees are challenging him. Directly after this passage we are told ²² 'At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' ²⁵Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; ²⁶ but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.'

The metaphor of the sheep is continued so it is fair to suppose this is the time of Jesus' speech. Jesus is at the heart of Jewish worship, the Temple; he is by Solomon's portico. King Solomon of

course had the first Temple built. It is also worth examining the detail John draws our attention to. It is at the time of the Festival of Dedication. That is the Jewish Festival of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights. Remember Jesus has said, 'I am the light of the world.' This would have resonated with all who heard it. Hanukkah, as a rule, occurs in December. In 198 BC King Antiochus III conquered Judea and Samaria, he was fairly tolerant but his son Antiochus IV was not. In 168 BC he massacred many Jews; he outlawed Judaism and desecrated the Temple, even placing an altar to Zeus there. We can only imagine the horror and desolation felt by the Jewish nation. However this led to a revolt by Judah Maccabee and his followers. Their victory was nothing short of miraculous and in BC 165 the Temple was retaken and cleansed and rededicated. It was this dedication that Jews remembered at Hanukkah; together with the miracle of the pure oil which, though only enough for one day, burned for eight until more holy oil could be prepared. Judah founded a dynasty of Kings which lasted until the Roman conquest in AD 63.

All this might sound like a preamble but it is of huge significance, that is why John highlights it. Jesus cleanses the Temple; Jesus is the true King of the Jews, Jesus is the 'light of the world' and Jesus is the presence of the living God within it. With the coming of Jesus the Temple should be renewed, purified. Jesus brings the new covenant; he is the Saviour not only of the Jews but of the world. So here is Jesus at the heart of Jewish worship and he tells the Jews that he is not only from the Father but that he and the Father are one. In other words, I am one with God. It is important I think to see the passage as a whole so I have not limited myself to verses 1-10.

²⁷ 'My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one.' Jesus could not speak more plainly, 'The Father and I are one.' No wonder the Pharisees are furious and rock back on their heels in shock. He is a blasphemer, he is in league with Satan, and he is evil. All this is thrown at Jesus while the Jews pick up stones to hurl at him. But Jesus turns the accusations squarely back at them. No it is you who are deliberately being evil it is you who are sinners because you deliberately lead the people astray and reject me.

Jesus uses this pastoral imagery which continues to verse 18 to a crowd of people who would have understood it. We might be far removed from the soil, from sheep and farming, they were not. Many would have come from rural communities and many would have held those occupations and certainly have understood every word of his metaphor. It is important to understand that shepherding in Israel is very different to here. The central thing to remember is that the sheep are not driven from behind. The shepherd walks ahead with a staff to guide them and they follow his voice because they love and trust him. It is not out of fear that they run, they follow because they want to because they know the shepherd is leading them to the right place. They follow in trust. As Jesus says later,

²⁷ 'My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish'.

Jesus calls to all who will hear his voice and turn to him. The opportunity is for all, 'God sent his Son into the world to save the world.' Now is the challenge to them, will you hear my voice and follow me. Jesus is quite clear in the opening of our passage.

^{10.1} '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. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.'

Out on the hills, to protect the sheep, the shepherd would build a fold with rocks and bushes. It would be a pen, the sheep would be inside and the shepherd would lie across the entrance. He would protect the sheep from wild animals and from anyone who wished to harm them. It was a very dangerous way of life. The only way in would be via the shepherd. He is the true guardian of the sheep. Whoever tries to get in another way is a 'thief.'

Jesus has brought a new way, he is the Messiah, the one the Scriptures have foretold, and he is the one that the Jews have been waiting for. He brings a new way, a new covenant. He is the Saviour who will lay down his life for his sheep and bring salvation to the world. His is the only way; the old way of Judaism has been superseded. Jesus is saying this in the Temple, at the heart of Jewish worship. His words challenge everything and he is in grave danger, but that is the life of the true shepherd. He risks his life every day to protect his sheep and lead them in the true way, to his Father.

⁴ 'When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.'

Jesus is of course drawing heavily on the imagery of Psalm 23 and many of them would have recognised that.

¹ 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.'

Jesus has said he is the good shepherd. Here in Psalm 23 God is the shepherd. It is more than just a metaphor, Jesus is of God. The sheep know and trust the shepherd; he calls them all by name. Their welfare is at the heart of everything he does. In dangerous paths, when they cannot see him around twists and turns on a hillside, the sheep follow his voice and the tapping of his staff on the rock, 'Your rod and staff they guide and comfort me.' Only love and trust will make them do that. Jesus loves all who follow him. We need to follow in trust and love. He will lead us to the Father.

⁹ 'I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

The last line is a challenge to the Jewish authorities and Pharisees who want to keep the people in thrall for their own power seeking. The old way of Temple worship has been superseded by Jesus, Saviour and God. He, by his death and resurrection, will win salvation and new life for his people with their loving Father. This speech of Jesus is a challenge. Mine is the only true way to God, will you believe in me? Will you turn to me? Will you follow me? I will lay down my life to save you, to win eternal life for you. But it is a covenant, these are Jesus' promises, we have promises to keep on our side. We need to accept his word and turn to him and live in his way. Our commission is to take the good news into the world.

Jesus in his teaching here is drawing on years of history. The Jewish leaders were shepherds, Abraham the founder of the nation, Moses who brought them to freedom following God's guidance and the great King David who was a humble shepherd boy and of course David is the King from whom Jesus the Messiah is descended. Jesus is indeed the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Anyone who challenges that is trying to lead the people from the true path and, says Jesus, is a 'thief and a bandit.' No wonder the Jewish leaders are infuriated and try to kill him. But as Jesus says,

¹¹ 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd.'

He is walking in his Father's way, it is a way that leads to Calvary but it will also lead to the empty tomb and salvation for all who turn to him.

Jesus has been teaching how he is the shepherd who will lead those who turn to follow him to his Father. Now Jesus has returned to his Father. Early in Acts Luke tells of the wonderful coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus is no longer with his followers in bodily form but they are not alone, they have been empowered by the Spirit of God. Not only have the apostles been enlightened; they are able to understand the message of Jesus and the wonder of his death and resurrection. Now they can go out and teach the people in God's name.

Last week we heard of Peter's teaching and how three thousand were added to their number.

Today's reading follows on and we see the beginnings of the Christian church. If a church wants a pattern to follow this reading has it all.

⁴¹'So those who welcomed his message were baptised, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.' (Acts 2)

This is a tiny sentence, just as small as Jesus' new commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you' yet it encapsulates everything. When the rich man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life Jesus replies you know the commandments, especially love God and your neighbour, do that and you will live. Well here we have in a nutshell the pattern for Christian life. If a church needed to have an aim or objective they need look no further. Christian communities such as monks, nuns and indeed colleges will usually have these at the core. There is the study of the teaching of Jesus, worship with communion at the heart, prayer both private and in community and fellowship with one another. This is the earliest pattern we have of the life and worship of the early church. It simply can't be bettered and if we could hold this at the centre we would not go far wrong. Notice there is nothing about self here. No instead,

⁴³ 'Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.

⁴⁴ 'All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.'

They see day by day the power of the Holy Spirit working in the apostles. It is a Spirit filled church.

They in turn seek to follow the way of Christ. They are a Christian family. They do not seek to acquire material possessions for themselves as individuals, instead they live for the good of all. They share everything. Once again this is emulated by Christian communities because they are like a family.

Christ's family should be focused on caring for one another not looking after number one. What has

gone wrong sadly is desire for power, greed and self-aggrandisement. When that happens then the church is moving away from the teaching of Jesus Christ. Jesus is creator of all, he is part of the Godhead but he lived among us, he had no home or possessions, his whole time was spent in living for others and ultimately he gave his life for all.

That is our guide, 'love one another' means to care about one another, to have compassion for one another. To coin a phrase, Christianity should be like an I crossed out, the sign of the cross.

⁴⁶'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, ⁴⁷ 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.'

So after worship of God in the temple they return home and break bread together. From the very beginning they do as Jesus has said, 'Do this in remembrance of me.' The Eucharist is at the heart, together with prayer and worship together. They are living in harmony with one another. The divisions which have torn the church apart simply do not exist. This church is not named; they are simply followers of Jesus.

It is tragic to look back and to see how far we have come from this, to think of the terrible things that have happened throughout history and are still happening with religious factions dividing people. In microcosm churches have their own internal divisions. So much of it comes down to individualism. We need to get back to the beginning, to have Jesus' commandment emblazoned not only on the wall of the church but in our hearts, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' We need to become a family again, a Christ focused family. We need to go back and keep this pattern with us. Our God loves all, with God there is no status, no superiority, no nationality, nothing, all are one in Christ and loved and valued equally by God. He is our pattern and we must seek to live as he would have us do. I think this is one of the most inspiring passages in the New Testament. Their behaviour is infectious. It isn't just what people say it is what they do. People see the lifestyle of these early Christians and are drawn to it.

'And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.'

It has become a bit of a cliché to say 'Christianity is caught not taught,' but this is certainly an illustration of it. Jesus did not talk about it only, he lived it out in his life. We are called to do the same.

'Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?' John L Bell and Graham Maule

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