



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 4.5-12

John 10.11-18

I remember many years ago attending the Bible comes to life exhibition held in Tamworth Church. It impressed me a great deal and I have mentioned it in these reflections before, particularly when I have been referring to the temple in Jerusalem. There was a huge model of it on display there. There were all sorts of artefacts, some tiny like the example of a lamp, a replica of those used in the time of Jesus. It was made simply of clay and had a tiny wick which was threaded through to the body which held the oil. This would have given off a very small light but would have been typical of those used in a poor Jewish house. It made Jesus' words, 'No one lights a lamp then puts it under a jar,' very clear. It would need to be high up to give any adequate light.

One evening, which I remember vividly, they looked at 'The Shepherd Psalm' psalm 23. We know this psalm so well but it was wonderful to go through it line by line to discover its meaning and the role of the shepherd. The man who was giving the lecture was dressed as a shepherd. It begins, 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.' That in itself is so profound. God is our shepherd, we his flock will want for nothing if we put our trust in him.

Line by line that psalm extends the metaphor as the good shepherd who is God, tends his flock. 'He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.' Shepherding in the Holy Land is so different from here; the shepherd leads his flock and they follow him. There is no sheepdog herding from behind. Sheep are not silly; they follow because they trust their shepherd implicitly. They know that in his hands they are safe and their every need will be cared for.

<sup>4</sup> 'Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.'

When we think of this we often think of the valley of death. Here literally the valley is dark and the sheep cannot see their shepherd. What he does is to tap on the rock, they hear and they follow

through the danger to safety. It is worth reading psalm 23 carefully and looking at the metaphor of God's care for us

Jesus is calling on that same tradition of The Good Shepherd here. Just think of the great shepherds in the bible; Abraham, Isaac Jacob and of course David to name but a few. David was the shepherd boy who rose to become the greatest king of Israel. Indeed perfect kingship was seen in terms of shepherding the people.

The tradition of pastoral care continues to this day. It is the job of all clergy to be pastors to their people. Our bishops have pastoral oversight and carry a crosier, a symbol of the shepherd's crook meant to protect and care for their flock.

Jesus is drawing on the tradition of the ideal king being shepherd to his subjects. Jesus in chapter 9 of John's gospel has just healed the blind man. The Pharisees naturally are angry because they feel challenged; also of course it happened on the Sabbath so Jesus is contravening God's law, so of course by extension they say he is a sinner and cannot be from God. The man born blind however challenges them and says 'I can see and that is because God worked through Jesus'. Their answer is to drive him out of the temple.

'Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' <sup>36</sup>He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' <sup>37</sup>Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' <sup>38</sup>He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him.'

All this is not preamble; it explains why Jesus speaks as he does in chapter 10 following. He is the Good Shepherd, just as God is the shepherd of his people. Jesus is drawing on thousands of years of tradition when he uses this illustration. He is saying I am the promised King. As he says 10.7-10 <sup>7</sup> 'So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup>All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

Many people have and will come claiming to be God's Messiah, but they are imposters. Only those who come into the sheepfold of Jesus will receive the promises and salvation he wins for all Christians. This of course is one of Jesus' famous 'I am' sayings we will be looking at another next week. He is the gate of the sheepfold. All who come to God will come through belief in Jesus Christ and by following his teaching.

Jesus wins eternal life for us but it is costly for him. Jesus is the Messiah, the King, and the Good Shepherd who will 'lay down his life for the sheep.' It was the job of the shepherd to care for the sheep at whatever cost. He would make a sheepfold for them at night and lie across the entrance. Anyone or anything that enters the sheepfold has to enter by that gate guarded by the shepherd. The flock are his, he knows them intimately and the sheep know him, they will not follow another voice only his because they trust him.

Christianity is a relationship of love. Jesus our God knows us intimately and he loves us. We know him and we trust so that we follow his teaching and know that he is with us.

Jesus was called on to lay down his life for all humanity, to win forgiveness by taking the sins of the world onto himself. If you like he fought the wild beasts of sin, death and cruelty and he beat them forever on the cross.

<sup>14</sup>'I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.'

Now remember the Jews who oppose him and the Pharisees who have been demanding to know how he cured the blind man and are calling him a sinner are listening to all this. Jesus is talking of his Father God. He has told the blind man that he is the one sent from God. This is plain speaking. Jesus also makes it clear that the word of God begins with the Jews but it is for all peoples. Jesus is part of the Godhead. He is king of the cosmos. The word of God will spread outwards to the entire world. Now the teachings of Jesus are for the Gentile world too. It is the job of those first disciples, the first followers, to witness to Jesus and carry the good news of salvation and forgiveness into the world. To take Jesus' teachings and to tell people that this is the way they need to live from now on. The new creation comes to birth in Jesus and we help to bring it to fruition.

<sup>17</sup>'For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. <sup>18</sup>No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

This speaks directly of the resurrection. Yes Jesus will be executed at the hands of the occupying Romans but he has walked this way of his own will and in obedience to his Father. By no other way can love triumph over evil and humans be reconciled to God. As Jesus says at the end of the chapter, <sup>27</sup>'My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup>I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. <sup>29</sup>What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. <sup>30</sup>The Father and I are one.'

Nothing can be clearer than that! Jesus is one with God! Jesus will triumph in the power of God and he will live forever. As he says at the end of Matthew's gospel, 'I am with you always even to the end of the age.'

Jesus promises to send the comforter to his disciples as he speaks to them in the Upper Room on the evening of his resurrection. 'Wait here in Jerusalem' is his command to them. On the day of Pentecost they receive the Holy Spirit. They are transformed by 'the power from on high.' As I explained last week this does not simply mean that they are strengthened and are no longer terrified but enabled to come out of hiding and preach the truth of Jesus. Wonderful though that it is, it is by no means the whole story. No, the 'power from on high' is no less than authorisation from God. It is the power of God within them, as it was within Jesus and the healings they perform, they do through God's Holy Spirit.

We looked at the first of these healings in Acts last week. Peter and John meet the lame beggar at the 'Beautiful Gate' to the temple. They have 'no silver or gold' but they have so much more; the healing power of Christ. They trust in Jesus, they ask the beggar to look at them and in trust they are able to heal, 'In the name of Jesus of Nazareth.'

The wonder and joy of the man at his healing brings down a great crowd to Peter and John. Peter challenges them with killing Jesus but then invites them to repent and turn to him.

This inevitably leads to trouble. It is a challenge to the powers that be and in the temple precincts too! Jesus challenged the power of the priests and rulers and those in authority now Peter and John are doing the same.

What occurs just prior to our reading is this,

'While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, <sup>2</sup>much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. <sup>3</sup>So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. <sup>4</sup>But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.'

There are several points here. Firstly that already the disciples were carrying out Jesus' work they were taking out the good news and around five thousand repented and believed. Secondly the powers that be descend on them and have them arrested. Of course they do it is a direct attack on their actions and beliefs but more importantly on their powerbase. People in power are always terrified of losing it and that is why violent oppression is often their answer to opposition.

Jesus was a threat to their power, he was the Messiah one sent from God to bring a new way, God's way and sweep away the power of evil and oppression. That is why they killed him. I have just started to read, 'The cost of discipleship,' by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I have only read the introduction but it is profoundly moving and frankly amazing. Bonhoeffer was a scholar and pastor who stood out and confronted and condemned Hitler and National Socialism. He did so in the face of arrest and torture. He also condemned them from prison. Yet his ministry, bearing and his behaviour won the respect of prisoners and warders alike. He was executed in April 1945 just two weeks prior to the liberation of the camp.

The cost of discipleship began with these first followers of Jesus and is clearly illustrated here. Like them Bonhoeffer was not cowed in the face of his accusers but continued to speak out boldly.

Luke makes it quite clear that the Sadducees were <sup>2</sup>'much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.'

The Sadducees we remember did not believe in a resurrection. They are the ones who are rich and they made up the priestly caste and the ruling powers. Now Peter and John stand in the temple and speak not only of the resurrection from the dead but that the resurrection comes through Jesus whom they had killed!

The next day following their arrest Peter and John appear before Annas and Caiaphas. So the priestly caste and the high priest summon them. These are the men before whom Jesus stood just a few weeks earlier and who had condemned him and sent him to Pilate. All this was in the minds of the two men. They knew what dangers faced them.

<sup>7</sup> 'When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?'

Yet they speak out boldly with no concern for themselves. They are articulate and clear,

<sup>8</sup>'Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers of the people and elders, <sup>9</sup>if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, <sup>10</sup>let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.'

They are telling God's truth. This lame man was cured by the power of God in the name of Jesus Christ who you had put to death! Well the challenge to them could not be stronger. Yet what can the rulers do? There the lame man stands well and strong. And Peter continues,

<sup>11</sup>'This Jesus is

"the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;  
it has become the cornerstone."

<sup>12</sup>'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.'

The disciples make it quite clear that the old way has been replaced by the new way of Jesus, God's anointed Messiah. That salvation and resurrection from the dead come from Jesus and from nothing



and nowhere else. That includes the temple which is the power base of their accusers. Their words here are a direct quotation from psalm 118.

<sup>21</sup> 'I thank you that you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.

<sup>22</sup> The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone.

<sup>23</sup> This is the Lord's doing;  
it is marvellous in our eyes.

<sup>24</sup> This is the day that the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.'

Jesus is indeed the cornerstone, the one who holds everything together, he is the foundation of the new way. These Jewish rulers, by rejecting him, have rejected God and God's salvation.

What happens next and what is not included in our reading is this.

<sup>13</sup> 'Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. <sup>14</sup>When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition.'

This is the remarkable thing; these ordinary Galilean fishermen are transformed by the new authorisation from God. The rulers are desperate that they stop preaching about Jesus as saviour and threaten them with dire consequences if they don't. These disciples spell trouble just as Jesus did. However they have reckoned without the power of the Holy Spirit and the beginnings of the new order.

<sup>19</sup>'But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; <sup>20</sup>for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.' There is no answer to – do we listen to you or God? It's obvious! Maybe in life we need to ask that very question. There is no power greater than God's power. If what people are doing is against the teachings of Jesus then our job as Christians is to stand up for what is right. This may never be on the scale of the disciples or of people like Bonhoeffer but in our everyday lives we are faced with questions all the time. What would Jesus teach about that? Is this his way? Jesus says, 'If anyone wishes to be my followers they must take up their cross, deny themselves and follow me.' That is what the disciples are doing. They are obeying Jesus' command and his commission. As we read from the Acts of the Apostles week by week we will see them growing and telling of the ways of Jesus as they take his good news out into the world.

That commission is ours too. We are the latest in the unbroken line of believers, the Christian church throughout the ages.

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

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