



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Year C 2022

Acts 9.36-43

John 10.22-30

I am always rather sorry when the lectionary moves away from the resurrection appearances. However our gospel reading for this morning does link to Jesus' restoration of Peter by the Sea of Galilee. In the dawn of that early morning, after the disciples had shared a meal with Jesus, he took Peter aside and asked that searching question, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? He asked it three times. Three times Peter replied that he loved him and each time Peter receives a commission, 'Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. It is as if the three denials in the courtyard are wiped away by each statement. The link here is that, just before our gospel passage for today, Jesus has been teaching the crowds and he uses the same metaphor.

^{10.14} 'I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.'

This is the pastoral imagery that we are so used to. Indeed some of the earliest images of Jesus were not of him as the Emperor figure but as the good shepherd. The trouble is that this image has tended to be watered down and it should not be. The shepherd's life was a dangerous one and any good shepherd was prepared to give his life to defend the sheep. We should not forget that many of the greatest figures in Jewish history were shepherds; Abraham, Moses, and the great king David. The Messiah was to be of David's line, born in David's city Bethlehem. Psalm 23, the shepherd psalm, tells of the role of the good shepherd and in this case it is God, 'The Lord is my shepherd'. None of this imagery would be lost on the Jewish audience. Though they probably would not have understood the full implication of what Jesus was saying. Their reaction to his speech was varied, ¹⁷ 'For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No 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.'

Jesus is talking openly of his intimate relationship with his Father, about laying down his life for the sheep and then taking it up again, for us this has echoes of the crucifixion and resurrection but for the Jews it was mystifying.

¹⁹ Again the Jews were divided because of these words. ²⁰ Many of them were saying, 'He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?' ²¹ Others were saying, 'These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'

What do people do when they want to discredit someone who has amazing powers, who claims they are from God? Obviously they say the power is from the devil! Except that won't work because the powers of evil do not do good works, do not restore the sight of the blind or hearing to the deaf and they don't restore life. The truth is that only God can do that, or God working through someone. This episode is what immediately precedes our reading. So the question 'Who are you?' still hangs in the air. It is important to note where Jesus is,

²² 'At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon.'

So Jesus is in 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, which occurs as a rule in December. In 198 BC King Antiochus the Third conquered Judea and Samaria, he was fairly tolerant but his son Antiochus the Fourth 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 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, 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 in Solomon's Portico, it was a colonnade on the east side of the Temple, later early church members gathered there and Peter preached there. It is here that Jesus is challenged,

²⁴ 'So 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.'

I have said that the job of a shepherd could be extremely dangerous; well what Jesus is doing here is very very dangerous. Here he is, in the house of God, at the centre of Jewish worship and he is preaching and saying, for those who have ears to hear, I am he! The point is there are none as blind as those who don't want to see. The Jews have been waiting for their Messiah through the centuries; his coming has been foretold by the great prophets. Here stands Jesus before them, a man who gives sight to the blind, who makes the lame walk and has performed miracles before their eyes. Still they want to be told, they want proof. The worst of them even condemn him because he does these life changing wonders on the Sabbath! Jesus knows their hearts, the sheep that choose his way he will love and protect and save, those that refuse to see the light will never be persuaded.

But for all who do follow him he will give the promises of God. This is a clear example of the words in John 1.

¹⁰ 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,' Jesus is stating just this as he addresses them,

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. ²⁹What 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.'

In answer to their question as to whether he was the Messiah Jesus couldn't be much clearer when he says, 'The Father and I are one.' However this is the response of some of the Jews; ³¹ 'The Jews took up stones again to stone him.' That is how dangerous Jesus' ministry is! But he confronts them, he has performed life restoring acts' so he says, 'For which of these are you going to stone me?' of course they can't answer that so accuse him of blasphemy! He answers their charge of blasphemy by confounding it with scripture and simply walks away unharmed. But Good Friday echoes in our minds and we know that very soon there will be no walking away from the powers of unleashed evil, that very soon the Jewish leaders will rabble rouse and do away with him. What they don't reckon with is the power of God which bursts into new life on Easter morning. Jesus reigns as our Lord and our God. All this John's original readers and every Christian down through history recognise and rejoice in.

Last week we saw Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee being given his commission by Jesus. Now in the reading from Acts we see a very different Peter from the one who declared, 'I am going fishing!' He is fishing, but for people as Jesus said he would. Peter is working in Jesus' name and is filled with the power of the risen Christ. He is 'feeding Jesus' sheep' At the beginning of Acts 9 we have this wonderful statement,

³¹ 'Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.'

It just shows how faith in Jesus had spread. Peter was at Lydda, it is to the north west of Jerusalem, there we are told he found a man called,

'Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years, for he was paralysed. ³⁴Peter said to him, 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed!' And immediately he got up.'

Just look at Peter's words, 'Jesus Christ heals you.' Just as Jesus heals in the name of his Father, it is the power of the risen Christ which heals. Peter is simply his instrument. Initially, after the resurrection appearances in the upper room, the disciples try to work in their own power and they literally and metaphorically 'catch nothing.' Now things are very different. They have received Christ's commission and go out in his name. Peter, just as Jesus has foretold, is able to heal the sick through his Lord.

Our reading this morning is one that I love. I have to admit that I have to smile at the line'

³⁶ 'Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.'

I love the television series 'Lark Rise to Candleford' and one of the main characters is the post mistress Dorcas Lane. I am convinced that the writer called her Dorcas because she 'went about

doing good' albeit in a very meddlesome way. That is by the by but how wonderful to go down in history as one who spent your time doing good works and acts of charity. Dorcas or Tabitha was a follower of Jesus, she is not rich or powerful she is simply good. It is obvious that her rule of life was Jesus' commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' Dorcas lives in Joppa it is on the coast just north west of Lydda where Peter is. Dorcas, we are told, has just fallen ill and died. The women are around her and are mourning her passing; we don't get the feeling that these are the typical wailing women who would do this at a death. No these are widows who are full of grief because Dorcas was a good person. She sewed clothes and gave them to the poor. (In fact I found an old packet of pins the other day bearing the trademark Dorcas!) There is finality about this very homely scene, they had washed her body and laid her in an upstairs room, and yet!

Here is huge significance in these words,

³⁸ 'Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, 'Please come to us without delay.'

Dorcas was dead, just as Lazarus was dead, but the disciples at Joppa have faith that Peter can raise her to life through the power of Jesus. What Peter does is so similar to Jesus' raising of the little girl in Mark 5. It is worth reading the two accounts. Peter had been present at this event. Once again we are told Jesus takes command,

³⁸ 'When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.'

What follows is such a tender scene in the silence of that room,

'Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹ He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' ⁴²And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age).

Now look at Peter's action when he arrives at Dorcas' house. The widows are not performing; they are grief stricken.

³⁹ 'So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.'

It seems a strange thing to do; Peter has not come all this way to look at sewing! But that is to miss the point; these widows are imploring his help in love. They are showing him how kind Dorcas was making these clothes to help the poor. Peter's action now is so similar to Jesus' in the earlier account,

⁴⁰ 'Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, 'Tabitha, get up.'

This is almost identical to Jesus' words, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' We can imagine the quiet, the domestic scene. For anyone one who has witnessed a death they will know the deep hush and sense of peace that often comes to a room in such a situation. But both Jesus and Peter break the hush of death with a command to action, 'get up.' Life is restored!

'Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹ He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.'

What a wonderful account. Only God can restore life! Peter and the Apostles are doing great acts in the power of Jesus; the church is growing in number. But behind this story is Dorcas, or Tabitha and

thousands like her. In those days there was no welfare state, a widow could be destitute; Dorcas extended the hand of help in love. She didn't just believe in Jesus; she lived in his way. She acted out the love of Christ. Dorcas represents the unsung members of the church through the ages who have lived and loved their Lord in their own small corner and have by their lives tried to make a difference to the lives of others. We are all called to live our lives in this way. Very few of us will become famous by being called to great acts in Jesus' name, but every single one of us can keep Dorcas as an example. Notice what Peter does as he enters the room, 'he knelt down and prayed.' We must never underestimate the power of prayer. Peter did not think Dorcas was unimportant because she was a woman and unknown. No, he knew and understood that we are all known intimately to God and that he loves us all more than we can ever know.

As we go about our everyday lives it is worth remembering Dorcas who did not simply talk about Jesus but genuinely sought to let her life be guided by his way of love. So may it be said of us that he/or she 'was devoted to good works and acts of charity'.

'Brother sister let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you.' Noel and Tricia Richards

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