

I can hardly believe that my lovely black Labrador, Meg, will be 3 next month. We know each other pretty well and she certainly knows my voice, and when I call her she comes. Well, ok that's not always the case. She does still have a naughty streak – I don't know where she gets it from - If there's some particularly juicy smell she might well go off in search of some obnoxious rotten food, oblivious to my louder and louder calls. The week before last she had a very poorly tummy and felt very sorry for herself – all because she ate what she shouldn't.

But when we go somewhere new and unfamiliar, It's very noticeable how much more attentive she is when we are out walking; she watches and listens, never going too far ahead and if she starts heading down the wrong path I only have to say, 'this way' and she's with me in a flash.

You see, if you don't want to miss out on anything, if you want to hear all the instructions, if you don't want to get lost, you need to stay close – to stay in earshot and be obedient to what you hear

In our Gospel reading Jesus says 'my sheep hear my voice, I know them and they follow me.' We are very familiar with the idea of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. And the verses in today's reading follow on from the well known passage where Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, the One who goes ahead of them – the One who it is safe for them to follow.

Often when we think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd we imagine pictures of him holding a lamb, surrounded by happy children, and maybe some well groomed sheep. It's a gentle pastoral scene, captured in many paintings and pictures. But the reality of what he was talking about when he referred to himself as the Good Shepherd was and is very different. The Bible frequently uses the picture of a shepherd and his sheep to speak of a king and his people. In Ezekiel 34 the ideal king is pictured as a shepherd. So when Jesus uses this image he is speaking about power and authority, about God's kingdom and the world's kingdoms and about God appointing a true king.

And now in John 10:24, the leaders of the Jews want to know. Is Jesus the Messiah, Israel's true king? Despite all that Jesus is recorded as saying to the Jews, he has never publicly stated that he is the Messiah. Earlier he had made it known to the woman at the well but that was no public proclamation. He had made some astonishing claims – that he was the source of Living Water, Light for the World, Shepherd for the Sheep but publicly he had not actually said that he was the Messiah, God's anointed one and so the king of the coming Kingdom of God. And now the Jews ask him directly. Jesus replies 'I have told you, but you do not believe.' So what does Jesus mean by saying I have told you when there is no clear previous statement? Well, I think he's saying that the answer is plain enough to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Anyone listening to what he had said about the Good Shepherd would have picked up the message easily enough – He has told them, but they haven't been listening.

Sometimes we just don't hear what's really being said even if we like to think that we do. Those who believe in Christ are his sheep, and they come to recognise his voice. We need to recognise Jesus' voice; we need to hear him when he speaks to us.

How long does it take for a sheep to come to know a shepherd and to recognise his voice? A week, a month, a year or does it happen immediately? I really don't know. And can a sheep forget it again if not in regular contact – if the shepherd goes on holiday? Again I don't know. They say dogs don't recognise their owners after a certain time although I'm pleased to say Meg didn't forget me whilst I was in Uganda last year. But there must be some truth in saying that the time you spend with someone, the more regularly you are in their presence and listening to their voice, the easier it is to recognise that it is them, and to understand what they are saying – and perhaps, not saying. The sheep need to be with the shepherd in order to know him, to keep hearing his voice. We need to spend time in the presence of Jesus – it is an ongoing process. And the more we hear his voice, the more we grow in confidence and the easier it is for us to recognise that it is Jesus' voice we are hearing.

I believe that God speaks to us in many and various ways, and sometimes in different ways to different people and at different times. We can certainly hear God speaking to us when we read the Bible, and God may speak through a sermon that is preached. He speaks through the promptings of the Holy Spirit giving us an inner conviction about

something, perhaps an idea popping into our mind which we feel we need to explore further. God continues to speak through the majesty and glory of his Creation, and sometimes he speaks into our hearts as we worship. Many people will testify that it is as they have prayed that they have been aware of God's voice. And God speaks to us, too, through the words of other people. We need to be able to recognise His voice in order to respond.

Peter, in our reading from Acts was able to recognise that the men who came from Joppa were speaking to him of what God wanted him to do – to go with them to Joppa. Peter was quite a celebrity by this time – there had been many healings, many people had come to believe and no doubt many were coming to him and making demands on his time. Yet he recognized that this request was of God because we are told he went with them without delay. Sometimes we only learn later the significance of what God is prompting us to do. For Peter, it was that God wanted to use him in giving Tabitha back her life.

There are certain times in our lives when the decisions seem very big indeed and when we are more likely to say, Lord speak to me that I might hear what I should do. I'm at one of those points now, wanting to hear God about the right way forward – where. Lord, do you want me to live and work, where are you calling me to? But seeking to hear God's voice in the particular cannot be separated from hearing God's voice in the general. What I mean is that if we seek to listen to his voice in our daily lives – as I'm sure Peter would have done in his prayer, in his reading of the Scriptures, in his sharing with the brothers and sisters – if we seek to listen to God in our daily lives we are more able to hear him in the big and difficult decisions too. Stick close to Jesus to remain in earshot – so that when we are to go in a particular direction, especially if it's a new one, we feel safe

If we need to recognise God's voice as individuals, so too, we need to hear God speaking to us as a Church. Over the past couple of years we have been seeking to discern God's vision for St Peter's, seeking to listen to what he has in store for us. And over more recent months we have been listening to God and to each other as we work out how to put the structures and strategy in place to see it God's vision realized. And as we gather together today for our APCM we can celebrate the good things that God has been bringing about through our listening and being obedient to him. And as we look ahead, again we need to listen to God and we need to do it together as a community, sharing the wisdom given to each of us.

I think God probably speaks to us more than we realise – but sometimes we don't recognise that it is his voice. The more time we spend in his presence, the easier it becomes to recognise his voice even when he chooses to speak in unexpected ways.

*The man whispered "God, speak to me" And a meadowlark sang.
But the man did not hear.*

*So the man yelled "God speak to me!" And the thunder rolled across the sky.
But the man did not listen.*

*The man looked around and said "God let me see you." And a star shone brightly.
But the man did not notice.*

*And the man shouted "God show me a miracle" And a life was born.
But the man did not know.*

*So, the man cried out in despair. "Touch me God and let me know that you are here!"
Whereupon God reached down and touched the man.
But the man brushed the butterfly away and walked on.*

Prayer

Lord, we thank you that you speak to us in many and varied ways. Help us to recognise your voice, to listen to what you are saying and to respond in love and obedience, in the name of Christ. Amen