

**26 April 2015. Acts 4: 5-12 and John 10: 11-18 Jesus: the good shepherd.**

I tend to find these days that I watch television very much on demand. Long gone are the days when I worked out an evenings' viewing and managed my tea and comfort breaks around either the length of the programme or the adverts. No, now I record or use IPlayer and the like. I find though that because of pause and rewind I often don't give a programme the attention it deserves. If I find that I've missed a bit (probably because I'm emailing at the same time) then I can simply go back and watch it again. A few weeks ago though there was a programme that I wanted to give my full attention to and so I decided to watch it live. I knew if I recorded it, then it would just go into the pile of those that I will get round to someday. Kill the Christians was on BBC2, and is an examination of how Christianity is facing the greatest threat to its existence in the very place where it was born.

It was profoundly shocking. It didn't show pictures of extreme violence, but it was shocking because it showed the destruction of normality and freedom. It was uplifting because of the courage of both the leaders of church communities and of those who stuck to their faith in the face of extreme pressure.

One of the church leaders, in Iraq, was clear that his community had no future and he appealed to the western nations to accept his people even though they would not meet immigration standards. In the meantime he will do what he can to protect and encourage those of faith. Leadership amongst the ordained and courage amongst the laity shone through this programme.

And that's what the gospel and the passage from Acts is also about.

This image that Jesus uses of the shepherd is of someone who nurtures, heals, rebukes and leads his own. The sheep belong to him and he leads them, he doesn't drive them. It's subtly different from the image we might have from one man and his dog, or one man and his quad bike, where the sheep are driven. Instead the middle eastern way of shepherding is to lead the sheep. Sheep recognise their shepherd through the sound of music on a pipe or whistling. There is a story from the 1980s occupation of a village outside Bethlehem where all the sheep were rounded up and put in a pen until the villagers paid a tax. One woman asked for the return of her sheep and the soldiers agreed she could have them if she could separate them out from the others. Her small son played a short tune on his pipe over and over again. Gradually certain sheep in the pen pricked up their ears and lifted their heads and moved towards the sound. The boy led his 25 sheep away. And it's not just sheep. In China there is a nomadic tribe where, at the end of the winter, reindeer return from foraging where they can and responding to different calls and rattles they separate out into their various ownership groups, where they are known by, and respond to, their names.

Jesus knows that the desert places where flocks of sheep are raised are dangerous places. The shepherd is skilled and courageous. If the flock is to flourish then it will need to recognise his voice and his leadership. If we think of ourselves as individual sheep, responding to the call to follow Jesus, then we need to recognise the perilous environment of our lives, our need of guidance and to develop the skill that can tell the right voices from the wrong voices.

The magazine in the Times yesterday ran a series of articles on 'Middle Age'. How can we tell when we have become middle aged? Is 50 the new 30 and so on. I've decided that I am in the 'later youth' bracket! But seriously I am interested in the way that character develops, while we retain the ability to welcome new things, exercising curiosity, simply adding new experience and melding them with those from the past. And yet also coming to learn the circumstances where we respond best and those where we respond less well. How we need to be recognised as individuals, to have a framework in which to feel safe.

And part of that character development, that layering of experiences that we sift through to test the new things that appear, is an ability to discern the right voices from the wrong voices. Who are the

current hired hands who will run away when the wolves appear? Well, one of looking at it is to ask who is leading people away from God, or whose leadership is inflicting harm on God's people. It doesn't mean we have to be in complete agreement with our leaders, rather that we ask ourselves who is bringing true harm? Bishop Mike is encouraging people who may not previously have thought of standing for Diocesan Synod. He writes: 'Our Synod is at its best not only when differing views are represented, but also when the rich diversity of gifts available to us across our diocese are brought together.' And 'the Bishop is there to listen to the Synod, in a way that will enable him (or her!) to seek to interpret what God is saying to the Diocese'.

Jesus talks about 'another flock'? Who or what might that be? Well, to the audience he was talking to it, it was anyone who was outside the traditional flock of Judaism. For us it can mean a new generation who were not raised within the traditions of our ancestors. It can be those who don't fit our demographic – Henleaze ward apparently is the most homogenous, educated middle class ward in Bristol. It can be those who, for reasons of physical or mental illness, bring a different view of life. This 'other flock' will enhance and enrich our community when we take time to get to know and to listen to a different point of view or experience. And in truth, we are each in some way members of both the 'home flock' and the 'other flock'. I've spent much more time with my siblings over the past few years than I had over the previous 20 years. And I'm struck by how similar and dissimilar we are, all at the same time. That is the same for any community in which we spend time, for our workplaces, where we volunteer, our intimate friendship groups and our church places. The vision is for us to see each other as Christ sees us, to see beyond the bonds of economic, cultural, ethnic divisions. Jesus brings us together and through that common bond, we learn to know each other as Jesus knows us.

Peter is asked by whose authority he speaks and he answers 'in the name of Jesus'. Names of those in authority carry much weight and power. Where I work if someone says – Paul has asked for it, everyone jumps to attention. We learn to write briefing papers in the way he likes to read them. To put the bad news in a way that he will not reject it, but will listen to a solution. Paul is our Chief Executive, but he is retiring in June. We will have to learn a new name to jump to, a new way to draft advice. Jesus though can be seen as unchanging, an anchor, a rock. He plays a tune for us to follow that we will recognise down the years. He will not retire. But he can and will challenge us to listen to the familiar tune in new and different circumstances. To ask us to apply our familiar gifts and talents in new and different ways. To be his hands, his ears, his eyes in places of need, of hardship and in places of joy and thanksgiving. May we have the flexibility to be led by Jesus.

Amen

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