

Sermon 25 April -I know my own and they know me (Acts 4:5-12, John 10:11-18)

What does it mean to you to have Jesus in your life?

Think about it for a bit, what does it mean to you?

This was the question put to us in the 11.00 service last week for discussion in chat rooms. For those not familiar with Zoom, this is where a group is divided into smaller groups on screen to aid more productive discussion. It is a useful tool and can allow more people to participate and have their voices heard, but, if you are struggling for something to say, can also be a bit awkward.

This is what happened to me last week. Under pressure to say something to encourage my children who were sitting next to me, but at the same time, trying to hide the fact that my daughter was still in her pyjamas, I muttered something about a favourite hymn and God's great provision to us at various times in my life.

Nothing wrong with that, but I felt it hadn't begun to cover all that I wanted to say.

Why am I telling you this, you may well ask? Well, partly (and unashamedly) to try to rid myself of that feeling of "if only I'd said that...." which has been nagging me all week. It started later that day, when I looked at the passages for this week's service, I found exactly what I wanted to say in today's gospel.

I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows me better than I know myself. He knows and has provided, what I need, even when I don't know. The verse immediately preceding this passage says this;

"I came that they might have life and have it abundantly"

Jesus will do anything to help me thrive and has done everything, including laying down his life for me. I didn't choose it for today, but we will be singing the hymn I referred to during the offertory. Great is Thy Faithfulness O God my Father.

"All I have needed Thy hand has provided". The words are on the weekly sheet and always remind me of two occasions when my life has been unexpectedly thrown into turmoil. Both times involve the birth of twins. If you had asked me at the time, I would have told you that I was firefighting and muddling through life in those weeks and months surrounding their birth, but looking back, particularly after the second set of twins was born, I can see how God provided for material, emotional and spiritual needs.

Although the scenario was the same, how to manage twin babies and young children, my needs were different, and God met them in different ways.

Of course, this all happened a long time ago, and thinking about it this week has reminded me that Jesus, The Good Shepherd has walked alongside me many times before and since.

The Psalm for today is Psalm 23 The Lord is my Shepherd. We sang a version of it in our opening hymn. Most of us have little experience of life as a shepherd, but King David, who wrote the psalm, had been a

shepherd boy himself. His words reflect the constant and unending task of providing for his sheep. Always moving forward seeking fresh pasture and clear water that they need to thrive.

As well as providing day to day sustenance, the shepherd is also guiding at momentous times in life. Guiding us towards the right path when we are faced with difficult choices. Supporting and caring for us as we face challenging and difficult times in the dark valleys, or as one Scottish commentator called it, the gloomy glen.

I know my own and my own know me.

The Good Shepherd guides us, but often that guidance provokes us as his followers, his hands, eyes and feet, to minister to those we travel with. It is worth remembering that sheep are not solitary animals, they come in a flock. How do we care for those around us?

Two topics in the news this week have highlighted areas where people's needs have not been understood. The owners of several major football clubs clearly did not appreciate the needs of their fans when they signed up to join a super league. The fans, players and commentators made their voices heard and the owners made a rapid U turn.

Sadly, the other matter cannot be so easily and quickly resolved. There are more voices and they are not always so clearly heard. The report of the Archbishop's Anti-Racism Taskforce and the findings of a Panorama programme earlier this week has highlighted how the needs of people of colour have not been met within the church and that, often, they do not feel known and understood by those around them.

As a white middle class woman, I don't feel very qualified to talk about this. It goes without saying that insults and discrimination are wrong, but I have recently started to appreciate just how much constant small snubs, setbacks, lack of role models and opportunities can grow into something so more destructive than the sum of their parts.

It is tempting, when faced with difficult truths to deflect the problem, that's not for us, that is a problem for inner city churches or churches from another part of the country. This is not time to run and scatter like the sheep who are led by a hired hand, but to stand together with the Good Shepherd as he leads us through rocky terrain.

We should join with the Archbishop of Canterbury in praying for wisdom, courage and grace to bring real change.

We can be encouraged in this by the words of Peter in the passage from Acts. Responding to the immediate need of a beggar for healing and the needs of the world to hear the good news that all could be healed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Peter took the opportunity to speak boldly and courageously before the Sanhedrin.

Peter knew the power of the Holy Spirit to bring about change. He had himself rejected Jesus when he denied knowing him on the night of Jesus' betrayal. But had also experienced forgiveness and restitution in the days following the resurrection.

His words stressed that our lives must be firmly founded on Jesus Christ. The corner stone. We learn in the following verses that the leaders tried to stop Peter preaching in Jesus name, but he would not be budged.

He followed the shepherd on the path set out for him. Even when that meant imprisonment, torture and ultimately death for his faith.

And as he walked that path, he grew in faith, he adjusted his own thinking and understanding, so that gentiles could be included in God's kingdom. Peter made the most of all the opportunities provided to him to preach, teach and heal and to spread the good news.

Jesus said "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me."

By allowing ourselves to be known, guided and changed by Jesus, we will find that we come to know Him better too. We will be better equipped to recognise and receive that great faithfulness mercy and love which allows us to thrive in abundant life.

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