

In our gospel reading this week we are treated to one of the most iconic images of how God relates to us - the Good Shepherd. It complemented by the psalm - perhaps one of the most well known - "The Lord is my shepherd".

I'm sure you all have years' worth of experience and baggage to bring to these texts. Perhaps you know and love the psalm, or you have a favourite setting. Perhaps it reminds you of a funeral, or a time of struggle. Perhaps the idea of the shepherd laying down his life for his flock doesn't chime with what you've seen happen in modern farming, so you find it frustrating.

Whatever your initial reactions, you can't argue with the enduring nature of these images.

I want to start by picking up a few words from the midst of John 10. "They will listen to my voice" Listening, the 'other sheep' will follow the Good Shepherd and be joined into one flock with the first flock.

I'm sure you've all heard phrases like "When I heard it, I just knew" or "If I could just hear his voice again." Or "She didn't sound like herself" Our voices are an important part of our identity.

Perhaps you have had the opposite experience. When you haven't properly heard and recognised a voice. I called my Grandmother the other week. Since my Grandfather died, she lives alone and this being the midst of a pandemic I doubted that she'd be having any visitors.

When the phone was picked up, I heard a man's voice on the end of the line. I didn't know if I should be worried or apologetic. I started wondering if I had the right number, if something terrible had happened to my Grandmother, if she had non-regulation visitors!!

After a moment's confusion the man revealed himself to be my uncle. They had formed a bubble, and he was visiting for the weekend. The threatening, confusing stranger was transformed into a friendly figure the moment I knew who he was. Not being able to recognise his voice had kept me from being able to talk to him and listen to him properly. Instead of a friendly greeting he'd gotten a slightly cold request to speak to my grandmother.

Knowing who we're speaking to helps us to listen to what they're saying. It helps us to trust.

Perhaps you're aware of the culture of 'fake news' that exists today. Social media, news monopolies and the internet have amplified so many voices that it's difficult to tell what is 'true' and what is 'spin' or outright 'lies'. A news story spreads so fast that what was one small lie or comment is blown up and heard throughout the world. We have pockets of people seeking voices and opinions that only sound like theirs.

In all of this - who do we listen to?

That's a rhetorical question - at least in part - the Sunday School answer is 'Jesus'! The better question, is 'how do we know Jesus' voice'? Even if we are those sheep, being gathered into the fold, how do we hear our shepherd's voice above the raging of the wind, the howling of the wolves and the shouts of the hired hands.

When I called my grandmother, I didn't know who I was speaking to until he spoke his name, and mine. "Hi Jo, it's Adrian" he said - and immediately I knew that I was speaking to family.

In our reading from Acts Peter speaks out against the rulers and elders and scribes - challenging their ideas of who God is - but he does it in Jesus' name. Just as he healed the sick man 'by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth'. So, we might rightly want to trust those who speak to us in the name of Christ. After all, surely those are the ones we would expect to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak in love and truth.

And while that is very often true - we also know it isn't always the case. The Church of England (and every other branch of the Church) has been shaken by the actions of those who abused this assumption. Who used their words and actions to harm rather than heal, who used the power and authority given to them by the church to further their own interests and not God's. Sometimes this was intentional, sometimes it was misguided or simply blindness to the reality.

The Church's reports on sexual abuse, on racial injustice and racism in the Church, on abuse of power and the new Living in Love and Faith program all show us that following the Good Shepherd is much more than hearing a voice or following all who claim to be acting in Jesus' name.

We are given, then, another tool for discerning God's voice from noise that surrounds us.

In our reading from 1 John we are told that we know love, that we know God 'by this, that he laid down his life for us' just as 'The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep'. We are called to follow that example 'let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him'

The voice that calls us will not just be a voice, but will be borne out in actions. Just as Peter and the other disciples didn't just claim Jesus' name but through it did a 'good deed done to someone who was sick' so we will see that voice at work in the world.

It's the same advice we are given in Matthew, when we are warned against false prophets 'By their fruit you will recognize them.' (Matthew 7:16). Words without actions are empty.

The voice of the Good Shepherd doesn't just call his sheep, but he walks with them even when the journey is tough and scary. As Psalm 23 says:

'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.'

Even when the wolves close in the good Shepherd stays. The voice of God might call us onto difficult paths or into difficult times but it never leaves us there, it walks with us through it. It inspires good actions and does good deeds in the world. It doesn't stand far off, for 'How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?'

There isn't an easy answer to discerning God's voice in the world, and the noise has only gotten louder. There is so much to overwhelm and distract us, but we have been given the tools to listen and there is God's voice in the midst of it all, calling us to trust and follow. That voice is one which offers healing and from which good things flow. It doesn't leave us in darkness but journeys with us. It calls us on until we reach that eternal kingdom where we 'will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever'. Amen.

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