

Sunday 3rd May 2020 ; John 10:1-10; 'Listening to the Shepherd'

This beautiful, calm passage about sheep and shepherds has brought much comfort.... But where is it set? Our Sunday readings are often taken completely out of context – a chunk on its own. The Bible was not written in Chapters – they are an artificial addition – it was made to be read as one long story, so we should always check what goes before and after. If you take the text out of context.... You get left with? A con. After church... go and read for yourself. In chapter 9, Jesus is at the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem and has just healed a man born blind.... And this has caused a real stir. The religious leaders got hold of the man's parents who are scared and then the man himself – the big question 'Who IS this man who healed you?' The man himself is pretty plucky: Read 9:30-33. If we look at what comes after we can see that the crowd is still weighing Jesus' words and actions and saying 'Who is this??' Now read John 10:19-21.

So.... Why does Jesus, in the middle of this controversy, start talking about sheep and shepherds.... Precisely to answer their question 'Who is he?'

Who was the most famous shepherd in Israel's history?..... King David who started life as a Shepherd boy and wrote many of the psalms. Yet David himself sung 'The Lord is my Shepherd.... All through the psalms God is identified as the Shepherd and Israel are his flock who he desires to lead and care for. Here in Psalm 95 we read:

For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would *listen* to his voice!

As we know, the Kings who followed David were not faithful and did not shepherd God's people well... and the prophets began to speak of the coming Messiah of God in the language of Shepherd – we find it in Ezekiel, Jeremiah and here in Isaiah 40 v.11:

'He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.'

That takes me right to that clip of Bernard feeding his flock by the church in Childs Ercall. But before we get carried away, there are a few differences between 21st century Shropshire and first century Palestine:

- The terrain was different; arid and stony with predators to steal sheep.
- At night they were herded into a walled pen on the edge of the village and a shepherd or hired man would lie across the entrance to stop sheep from straying out or wild animals from coming in. That is where we get the comforting verse in Psalm 121 from: "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore."
- There might be several herds in the pen, so in the morning the shepherd would go in and call his own sheep by name. How? Because he knew them; their markings, their behaviours – he probably had names for his sheep. So he would call them out and then go ahead of them – leading the way to safe pasture.
- Think about how different that is to big herds today where the shepherd drives them forward on his quad bike or with his dogs, snapping at their heels. You see this was a

bit like the Pharisees who taught people the Law and then told them to follow the rules. Jesus comes along living differently and saying 'follow me'. We can be driven forward in fear or lead forward in trust....

What about the sheep? How did they know to follow? They listened and recognised his voice. They had learned, like Bernard's sheep – by habit – to trust the shepherd; the hand that feeds them and they will therefore follow. Think about how this relates to our Christian walk – we learn that Jesus is the one who feeds our souls, we learn to recognise and trust him. Only 4 chapters ago, after the feeding of the five thousand when many begin to turn away because of some of Jesus' hard teaching; Peter says "Lord to whom else would we go? You have the words of eternal life and we believe and have come to know, that you are the holy one of God"

"He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice "

So, the Question is 'Do we recognise the Master's voice'.... Do we spend time listening.... And now of all times, God may be calling his people to 'Listen', like Elijah in the Cave (1 Kings 19) for his still, small voice. How does he speak to you? Each of us sheep are different, but here are some good ways to listen in the long days ahead:

1. Read the bible slowly and carefully – feeding on the words; maybe the psalms or a gospel. What resonates with you? What speaks into your soul?
2. Spend time outside in Creation and on your daily walk or time in the garden, ask him what he wants to show you. Jesus was constantly allowing God to speak through nature "Look at the birds of the air, the flowers of the field, the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.... Like a measure of yeast.... The Father was constantly showing and telling him things.
3. Listen for comments of friends or in news reports which strike a chord with you. Notice when you feel emotional – what moves you.
4. Don't lose these things, but write them down – the bible verse, the quote, the experience....
5. Pray, as Samuel did, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening...."

In the first week of the lockdown a neighbour said to me "Its as if God has sent us all to our rooms to think about what we are doing." Are we listening?

When this is all over.... God may be calling us to change direction; to follow where he is leading – will we listen.... As individuals and as a church?

.... Or will it be 'business as usual'?

Donald Coggan wrote: *"Christians believe in a God who speaks. Ours is not a silent God, a God who sits sphinx-like, looking out unblinking on a world in agony.... He speaks because he loves. Love always seeks to communicate."*

The question is.... Are we, will we LISTEN?