

Year C, Easter 4. 'Good Shepherd Sunday'

Acts 9: 36-43

Revelation 7: 9-17

John 10: 22-30

Given the gospel reading, today is often called, 'Good Shepherd Sunday' for fairly obvious reasons.

John's gospel places this event of Jesus' conversation with people, who do not recognise him as the Messiah, in December. It was the Festival of Dedication. It commemorated the rededication of the Temple after the Syrian king Antiochus had desecrated it. Judas Maccabeus had led a campaign that retook possession of Jerusalem in 164 BC. The commemoration recalled the apostasy among the Jews that had led to the desecration and destruction, and it included words instructing the people to remain steadfast to the Law of their God by proclaiming, "Never again!". Today this festival has changed emphasis somewhat, as it is now celebrated as Hannukah, the Festival of light.

Into this festival of dedication, Jesus walks into the Temple precincts, and a group of people who have heard of his reputation gather around him. A small number of people in the crowd had heard him speak before, and possibly seen him performing acts of healing.

There is a tone of impatience in their question. 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.'

As I reflected on this question, and why Jesus did not just reply, "Of course, I am the Messiah", I could see that that wasn't going to work.

Let us put ourselves in the place of the questioners who had heard about Jesus but not heard or seen him for themselves. Honestly, would we have been totally satisfied with an answer that said something like, "Of course, I am the Messiah"?

Despite how much we always want to identify with the good role models in scripture we should normally identify with the other ones. If I was in that crowd, I am sure that if Jesus had said something along those lines, the next words in response from me would have been, "Prove it!" In this gospel story the group John calls 'the Jews' really represent the archetypal person, the man

on the Clapham omnibus, so to speak. The people who want to see words backed up with hard evidence, there and then.

The group that are highly sceptical do not really listen to Jesus' response. They had already made their judgement about him, made from their own perspectives. I guess it didn't help that this took place during the Festival of Dedication, when the emphasis was on lamenting those who committed apostasy and the proclamations ringing in their ears to remain steadfast in their faith.

Jesus says that he has told them already that he is the Messiah and has performed works that could only be possible through the power of the Father. Jesus is clear that his actions speak louder, so much louder, than his words, and yet, those who have witnessed his works are still not satisfied.

Jesus uses a very familiar metaphor in that agrarian economy, that of the shepherd. A sheep recognises its shepherd's voice and will follow its shepherd. A sheep won't follow a voice it does not recognise.

This group that John collectively calls 'the Jews' had chosen to not become part of his flock. They had the opportunity but had chosen not to do so. They had chosen not to accept him as the revelation of God, despite what their scriptures had foretold. In their minds, they would wait for the fulfilment of scripture. They were unable to see and hear that Jesus *was* the Messiah. This group of people were unwilling, and at one level unable to respond beyond the limitations of their current understanding and teachings, caught in a culture that was expectant for the Messiah but clearly didn't expect it to happen in their times. A real paradox.

But we know that some of the Jews had managed to cross that divide, had made the leap of faith, and had their eyes opened and hearts filled. They became the sheep who heard and followed and would be given eternal life. They would never be lost again as they were following the one true and authentic leader, the good shepherd.

This dialogue also underlines the fact that whilst the Temple building was where people could show they belonged to God, faith in Jesus' words and deeds would bring people into a closer and eternal relationship with God. Jesus is the visible presence of God, and as the Messiah, he replaces the Temple.

There are echoes here of the prologue to John's gospel: ...and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us...

What struck me was how in our current times, those who do not follow Christ are just as, if not more sceptical and critical, and throw up the same barriers to believing, if not many more, than those first century Jews in the Portico of Solomon did in addressing Jesus.

Words alone, as Jesus acknowledges, were not going to win over the most hard-bitten and sceptical. They were very unlikely to choose to join the flock and accept the Good Shepherd. So how much harder is it for us to bring others to faith today?

Jesus does provide us with a couple of ways into this.

Firstly, words are unlikely to convince. Our actions, our everyday behaviours, our choices as to how we live our lives really do matter. What is it we do individually and collectively, that shows we follow the way of Jesus? What is it in our lives that will make people curious about our faith, and want to know more? To become part of the flock?

Secondly, Jesus acknowledges that those who are his sheep hear his word. For me, this implies that there is truth in the statement that people tend to 'belong before they believe'. Many need to be part of a group where they are likely to hear of God's love and the saving actions of Jesus for us all, where we love despite our own individual failings, our imperfections; where people can sense an authentic wish to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd in their lives, and be part of God's mission in the world, using whatever gifts God has given them. It is a place where they are likely to be more open to the influences of the Holy Spirit.

It seems to me that the challenge for us today is two-fold.

Firstly, with God's grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are called to be the best version of ourselves that we can be, living our lives in faith, and doing the best we can to love our neighbour as ourselves and to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

Personally, having a Spiritual Director to explore these and much more has been an important discipline for me, alongside being accountable to other members of the Iona Community for my use of my time and my resources. I am not claiming to be anywhere near being perfect but having these in place

helps stop me kidding myself and stops me straying too far. I wonder what does or may work for you?

Secondly, how do we portray our lives and the choices we make to others? Do we come across as far too pious and 'holier than thou'? Do we set ourselves up to fail? Are we making our faith interesting to others, or off-putting? In a complex world do we admit to having to make compromises, whilst doing our best to follow the way of Christ? Are we open to discussing and describing the life choices we make in order, as best we can, to live a righteous life; a life where we commit to being in right relationships with God and with all other people?

A compelling vision is described by Timothy Keller in the opening chapter of his book, 'Generous Justice'.

He states that 'justice' is all about having 'right relationships'. He says that righteousness is much more than personal morality and includes two aspects. The first involves what he labels as 'rectifying justice'; treating all people equitably and caring for the victims of unjust treatment (*mishpat* in Hebrew). The second involves what he labels as 'primary justice' (*tzadeqah* in Hebrew). It is behaviour that if prevalent across the world would render *mishpat* unnecessary because everyone would be living in right relationship with everyone else.

Jesus makes clear in this gospel reading that it is his actions and his words that are important, and that when someone is open to these, they are likely to choose to join his flock.

This gospel passage poses this question for us today. How can we help others get a glimpse and taste of God's kingdom, so they may be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, and come to recognise the voice of the Good Shepherd?

Let us pray:

Thanks be to you, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have given me, for all the pains and insults you have borne for me. a most merciful Redeemer, Friend, and Brother. May I know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen'.

*St Richard of Chichester*