

Up the garden path

A sermon prepared by Revd Canon Andrew Wright for the 4th Sunday of Easter 25 April 2021

Refs: Acts 4. 5-12; 1 John 3. 16-24; John 10.11-18

“They too will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

Here is a story you may find hard to believe but I promise you it is absolutely true. A while back I was asked by a neighbour when we lived down in Oakthorpe Road if I would feed their cat for a couple of days. I was happy to do so. She told me that the key was under a flowerpot by the back door and explained exactly where the cat food was. The next day I duly went around and went up the garden path. Sure enough the key was there under the flower pot. I let myself in. However, I could not find the cat food anywhere. I searched around vigorously and eventually found some in a completely different place. I put the food in the bowl and left. I had not been to their house for a few years and the house was looking particularly run down and rather dirty – most unlike them I thought – they must have really let things go. As I walked up the path, I noticed that the garden too was looking surprisingly unkempt. Suddenly I realised this was the wrong garden path and the wrong house!! I had fed the wrong cat. This was the house next door! What does one do in this kind of situation? I thought I had better undo my mistake so I let myself back in, poured the cat food back into its container, locked up and went next door!! This sermon is really about trying to find the right garden path!

I was gripped by the following poem, *The Journey*, by Mary Oliver, one on which I often reflect.

*One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.*

*It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do,
determined to save
the only life that you could save.*

This is a poem about the voices which we listen to, about the courage to live truthfully and authentically. It is about learning to find who you really are, to find your own voice, to take responsibility for who you are, to make sense of your life.

Many years ago, I was in our old campervan on the beach in Corinth, in Greece, where we were spending the night. Our children were all asleep and my wife and I were sitting in the two front seats looking out to sea. Far off we heard the tinkle of bells but they were coming closer and closer. Suddenly out of the darkness, along the beach but at the edge of the water came a shepherd, robed, bearded and with a long, long line of sheep following him closely. It is of course the Middle Eastern way to lead rather than drive. To both of us it felt strange – it was a dreamlike, almost ghostly,

experience. As quickly as they had emerged, so equally quickly they faded into the night and were gone. It was as if we had suddenly stepped into the pages of the Bible.

The image of shepherds in the Bible, often good but sometimes bad, is frequent, unsurprisingly in the largely rural environments from which these stories emerged. In the Old Testament, David, the shepherd of the sheep, becomes the shepherd of Israel - and Ezekiel refers to kings who have been unfaithful shepherds. God himself is referred to several times as a shepherd, including in Psalm 23 – The Lord is my Shepherd. In the synoptic gospels we get the story of the lost sheep and Jesus addresses the disciples as his little flock. Even Paul uses it as an exemplary image for the leaders of the Christian community – “be shepherds of the sheep”. The shepherd theme of John 10 comes as no surprise.

John’s Gospel is very likely to have been written in a difficult environment. It probably comes as a Jewish Christian voice from within a Jewish community. The Jewish Christians have mainly been living peacefully alongside their neighbours but there comes a period when, under the pharisaic leadership, a harder line is beginning to be taken against those who, while faithful to so much of their heritage and living in accordance with so many Jewish customs, have taken the view that Jesus is the Messiah. Elements of enforced separation, perhaps even persecution, are beginning to creep in. In a series of 18 benedictions that emerged within Pharisaism around this period, the 12th one specifically pronounced judgement on the Nazarenes. “May the Nazarenes perish as in a moment”. It is a demonstration of harsh exclusivity and tribalism which sadly we see so often and of which the Christian Church has itself often been guilty. It was a sign that things were getting more awkward for Jewish Christians.

This seems to be a likely context in which we should see John 10. In fact, its preceding passages in chapter 9 suggest it is partially addressed to the Pharisees. However, even if you take a wider view in relation to the background within which this Gospel emerged, there were all kinds of competing routes to salvation. Many voices were vying for the attention of listeners. How did you discern which would lead you beside the still waters and which might lead you into the wilderness?

Perhaps this is why voices feature very specifically in this chapter. Verses 4 and 5, in the passage immediately preceding today’s gospel, talk about the sheep listening to the gatekeeper’s voice, knowing it and avoiding the voice of strangers. And in verse 16, in relation to other flocks to which he is also shepherd, we are told that they too will listen to this voice. The chapter moves swiftly with slightly different metaphors for the same person, clearly Jesus – The Gatekeeper, The door to the sheepfold, the Good Shepherd. “I am the Good Shepherd”. What a potent, comforting and attractive phrase. The word “good” can also be translated as “beautiful”, perhaps a deliberate allusion to the beautiful, ruddy faced David of the Old Testament. It can also be translated as “ideal”. The Beautiful Shepherd, the Ideal Shepherd, The Good Shepherd. Whichever way you look at it we find John’s very high view of the nature and centrality of Jesus, just as you do across the full length and breadth of his Gospel. To him his is THE voice, the absolute key to authentic and truthful living.

He gives three reasons for listening to this voice in this chapter. Firstly, listeners sense that this is the voice of someone who really knows and understands us, just as the sheep within a flock are known by their shepherd. Secondly, this is the voice of someone who is fully engaged and committed to us, not like someone hired in for the day who has no vested interest and who might well run away at the first sign of danger or lose interest at the first distraction. Finally, in a direct reference to the crucifixion which forms the absolute core of John’s Gospel, this shepherd is one who will lay down his life for the sheep, the one whose absolute love and care will lead him to the ultimate sacrifice. In these things lies the power and authority of the Good Shepherd’s voice.

Even within the Christian faith and within the Church there are plenty of competing voices echoing around, suggesting what we should believe, what we should think and what we should do. There are traditions we may be called to observe, or boundaries of belief expected of us. Not all of

these may necessarily be God-given. They too can trap, confuse, diminish and prevent us being honest to ourselves and in relationship with others. John in his gospel and in his echoing of the stories of Jesus which have formed him, believes real living starts with a response to the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the one who knows us, engages with us and lays down his life for us. Each of us has to figure out what that means, in conversation with the Bible, with past traditions, with one another and in prayer. That is a process requiring courage and openness but in it, as John says elsewhere, can be found life in all its fullness.

We should rightly long and work for the “one day” of Mary Oliver’s poem, the day when we find our own voice and being in tune. As Christians we believe that our own voice and being can best be found in conversation with the voice of our Good Shepherd.

As Mark Oakley says in his commentary on this poem “I cannot help but think that all those who encountered Christ in the Gospels, and the ways in which he subverted their self-understanding, distilling it off from how others looked at them and telling them to listen to God’s love for them instead, would all be able to read this poem with a very deep understanding.

May we all seek the voice of the Good Shepherd and find in it the garden path that leads to the fulfilment and peace for which we all long. Amen