

John 10:11-18 I am... the Good Shepherd

Acts 4:5-12 Peter says: you crucified, God raised

Who's voice are we listening to?

This afternoon at the St. George's Day Parade service, I'm going to briefly touch on the fact that St. George – the real one, no dragons here – had a Greek father, and a mother who was a Christian from the large Roman province of Syria Palestine. He lived out his soldiering career as a Christian, possibly protecting and releasing those who were falsely imprisoned, neither of which would have made him popular. He was martyred for his unwillingness to denounce his Christian faith. The thought-provoking irony of having a Christian Syrian Palestinian soldier as our Patron Saint should not be lost on us in the next few days.

There is a priest in the Greek Orthodox Church in Aleppo, called Ghassan Ward. “[His] bishop was kidnapped in April 2013, [his] church was destroyed, and [his] house was bombed. [His] two sons left the country, [his] wife died of cancer and [he] lost two... close family members because of the bombings.” But despite all this, Ghassan chose to stay in Syria, and care for his hurting community. “Many of my parish were rich before, now they are poor. They have no work, no income and all the savings are spent during the years of war,” he says. “The role of the church is not only having the services - we welcome the people and we try to help solve their problems. God gave us the love. It's not easy to do this... The needs of the people are very big; we're trying to meet their needs... We also help non-Christians. They are our neighbours, we live with them, and we cannot neglect a person who is hungry. When we give them a loaf of bread, the love of Christ is written on it.” <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/syria-180417/> That story was told this week by the Open Doors charity, that serves and supports persecuted Christians. I have had it verified via one of the clergy and peers travelling in Syria this week, as typical of the work churches in the region are undertaking.

So what have these two people got to do with this morning's very famous, and deceptively simple parable? Jesus is making some important points about who he is, but also about us. They are based round a claim that he fulfills the Old Testament prophecy of Ezekiel 34, where the Lord says he will rescue sheep “from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness” (Ezek 34:12) and that he will “place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.”

Why it is that Jesus is in the position to be both the Lord God and King David, and thus the Good Shepherd of all God's sheep, is one of those things that this parable seeks to explain, and leads up to at the end of John 10. There Jesus declares “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). Everything Jesus says and does, is based on, and returns to, his relationship with his Father; that is the means by which he has the willingness, love and authority to both lay down his life, and take it up again.

Jesus is also reminding his listeners, Jews like himself, children of God's covenant with Moses, that God has always been interested in bringing more than just them into a relationship with him. This is being fulfilled in him, because it is through his death and resurrection that God reaches beyond the old covenant to the rest of the sheep in the world, a world that 3-4 centuries later would boast a Christian martyred soldier of Greek and Syrian heritage, and today includes a beleaguered Syrian priest with nothing left but his faith, funding from Open Doors, a team of like-minded survivors, and his desire to love all those in his community. Jesus came to create one single universal flock of people who know and love God, and have the freedom to do so.

The bond between the sheep and the shepherd, as well as the Father and the Son, is one of trust and love. When he styles himself as the “Good” Shepherd, there's a lot more depth to the meaning

than the bland little English word “good” suggests. It is more emphasising that the trust and love that Jesus offers people is attractive – it is what motivates people like Ghassan to be risking their lives in places like Aleppo. We, and more importantly those who’ve not encountered Jesus before, should see something beautiful, inspiring and ultimately counter-cultural in who he is revealed to be, and through what he calls us to do. When Jesus says, ‘My own know me... [and] listen to my voice’ (John 10:14 and 16), he is demanding our willingness to trust and love him, as he did his Father, and at the very least, to be willing to be obedient to the example that he sets us, through the inspiration of his voice, in this parable as among many others he told.

This was completely revolutionary and counter cultural to Jesus’ world, filled as it was with hatred and suspicion, violence and counter-violence... a world that perhaps sounds all too similar to our own?! In the context of his conversation with and in front of the Pharisees, Jesus is saying, stop listening only to your traditions, your senior religious figures, whether what they are saying sounds good or not. Instead, Jesus is saying, start listening direct to God, to a vision of a world that is different, where people share what they have with their neighbour without worrying about where they fit in any particular religious or political picture or ideal.

Do we want to be ‘good’? Do we want to be beautiful? Do we want to be shepherds, shepherds who welcome all-comers to the fold? Do we want to listen to the voice of Jesus, the voice of truth, the voice of love?

There are two levels, two areas of the world stage, on which we are invited today to respond to those questions; there’s the macro level, and rather closer to home, the micro.

On the macro-level, where is the beautiful love of Jesus for all God’s people, most visible? One place it would seem, is Aleppo where Ghassan Ward works bravely and painstakingly with other churches of many denominations to feed Jesus’ sheep. That, I hope you agree, is beautiful. The same could be said for the work of the Open Doors organization which supports him, supports vulnerable Christians in Egypt, India, Iran, and nearly 50 other countries where it is dangerous to be a Christian. If that work and those places are where the love of God for his people, and the love of his people for Jesus is most visible, perhaps theirs are the voices we need to take most care to listen to.

Still on a macro-level, perhaps we need to start questioning more carefully what we’re told by our political and dare I say it, our religious leaders, and certainly by today’s mainstream press. Where are we reading the counter-cultural voices, the stories of love, the hidden truths – even if they’re unpalatable or unpopular and don’t fit the current zeitgeist? Jesus says false shepherds flee the sheep in their care, and so we see those with authority playing fast and loose with the security and welfare of our neighbours, because their paperwork isn’t complete or they can’t contribute financially to society because of their disabilities. Sometimes even not knowing who to believe about the reality of whether a chemical attack happened or not, is better than believing the stories of either side without question. What would Jesus have us listen to and believe?

Which brings things rather closer to home, closer to the micro-level of our own parish and benefice, perhaps pertinently on this the day of our Annual Parochial Church Meeting, with St. Barnabas’s to follow on Wednesday. I’m sure you *will* want to listen later to Rev’d Lerys, as our Priest-in-Charge, but collectively we need to listen to how Jesus wants us to care for his flock, to look at the neighbouring ‘folds’ or parishes, to see where they need help to do the same, or where they might be able to help us.

And what about the other sheep, those that walk past the church in the sunshine, ride down the lane into the forest, stand at the school gate, sit at home and knit, sew or garden, and use the village shop and pubs? They need to know that Jesus is attractive, beautiful and good too, and that can only be done through what we say, and do.

Jesus had a two-fold vocation: to save the sheep currently in his care, and to enlarge the flock considerably by bringing in a whole lot of very different sheep (John 10:16). That vocation is ours, because we already know Jesus. Our responsibility now, is to listen to his voice, so that we know where and how to seek the other sheep that he wants brought into his fold.