

Lyn Valley Mission Community

Easter 4

Collect:

Almighty God, whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life; raise us, who trust in him, from the death of sin to the life of righteousness,  
that we may seek those things which are above, where he reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.  
Amen

Please read through these passages slowly and reflectively before reading my sermon.

Acts 2:42-47      Psalm 23      1Peter 2:19-25      **John 10:1-10**

In writing and reading may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

We have reached the fourth Sunday of Easter. Over the past weeks our gospel readings have helped us share with Jesus' first disciples the times in which they met the risen Jesus and gradually came to full recognition of their risen Lord: Mary Magdalene on Easter Day, Thomas a week later and those who walked to Emmaus. We have seen sorrow transformed to joy. As Mary weeps she hears her name spoken by a beloved voice and recognises her teacher, joyfully taking up his request to tell his disciples that he is risen. In his caution, Thomas finds himself invited to examine the wounds that will prove the resurrection to him, he is given exactly what he needs to recognise the one who is his Lord and God, and in his newfound belief he speaks out that truth. In their confusion and sadness Cleopas and his friend hear words that make their hearts burn and finally recognise Jesus when he breaks bread with them, bringing them such renewal that they rush back the way they came to share the news with their companions.

And today gospel Jesus tells us about the good shepherd:

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

Just take a moment to imagine that moment of recognition between the shepherd and sheep – or if its closer to home perhaps an image of the connection between rider and horse, or dog owner and dog, the arrival of birds to a feeder unafraid of the human who fills it, a cat curled up on a lap – and notice how it makes you feel.

Or perhaps recall the sound of a voice that you would recognise anywhere, the voice of one who knows you deeply, the voice which brings you home to a place of peace.

“He knows all his sheep by name ....the sheep follow him because they know his voice”

In the world around us there are a cacophony of voices, and whilst this lockdown period has changed lots of things, it has not changed that. In some ways the voices have become noisier: so much advice, so many suggestions as to how we might spend our time, so much news, so much interrogation of facts and rumours, politicians and experts. There are so many voices that at this challenging time we are now often being encouraged to protect our own mental health by being very selective about how much we listen to and to what we give our attention.

And similar advice lies at the heart of our gospel today too.

“Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit...(the sheep) will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers”

The importance for the “sheep” of knowing the difference between the thief and Jesus is made clear at the end of the passage:

“the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly”.

Here Jesus is telling us the purpose of his mission: that those created in the love of God may know and live in the abundance of the life for which they have been created. Jesus is all about the force of life in its purest, deepest, fullest form and all about overcoming death in all the forms that it occurs – both subtle and direct.

At its heart, that is why following Jesus is good news, and why Jesus encourages those who recognise his voice to help others hear him and follow him too. Just he encouraged Mary to tell his brothers of the resurrection, and he commended Thomas' belief to those who had not seen and Cleopas and his friend raced back to encourage the disciples: the message of newness of life is compelling and a joy to spread.

So what is this saying to us now?

I think it offers two possible areas for reflection in the coming week. You may like to stay with the one that seems most important to you now, or perhaps explore both.

The first is around listening for the voice of the risen Jesus.

Where do you hear a familiar voice of love, which you know is the voice of the good shepherd leading you where it is good for you to go?

It is worth remembering that it took time for even Jesus' closest friends to recognise his voice, it came unexpectedly and when they were looking in other directions; so if it is not an easy question to answer, stay with it, talk to God about it in prayer. Our prayer, our reading of the Bible, our conversation with others who listen for Jesus' voice and our memories of drawing close to God in sacramental worship may be some of the things that help us recognise Jesus in our wider experience too.

Becoming the sheep that not only recognise but listen out for Jesus' voice will help us follow him more surely through the varied terrain even at times when the voice feels faint. We know that he has travelled ahead of us through the suffering of death and the joy of resurrection so as Psalm 23 reminds us, so usefully in these

times, whatever we are facing he is there with us, and a route for us through it.

This Easter-tide, there is a particular invitation to listen for the shepherd who will lead us steadily through these “in between” times while we are waiting for things to change so we can take up again the things that happen communally. We are living through times when there is heightened anxiety and sadness, and an uncertainty of how long these days will beyond what will happen next. Recognising the companionship of the risen Jesus with us, God’s presence in it all may be a gift that helps us find patience and courage and comfort if that is what we need, or the ability to value what we are learning or seeing anew in this time if that is possible for us too.

Listening to Jesus so that we are the sheep that follow him in the days when we come out of this period is significant too. As I suggested last week, many are hoping that we can take what is good from this time and hold on to it as we reshape “normal life”. Knowing who we listen to, where we place our trust is important for this. Jesus calls us to abundant life, in following his way of life we will be able to filter out the voices that have other aims.

That brings us to the second, related area for reflection: abundant life, or as another translation puts it, life in all its fullness.

What does life in its fullness, or abundant life, look and feel like for you?

This may be offering clues about that either by what it is enabling you to enjoy, or by what you are deeply missing.

There seems to be a lot of agreement that during this time which no one would have wanted, and which is bringing great distress to so many, there is nonetheless a rediscovery of “the things that really matter”. Actually some of those who have expressed this most clearly are those who are suffering most (those who we hold in our prayers asking that they may feel love and comfort in their pain).

We are learning about those things, for example, about love and friendship, neighbourliness, the beauty of the natural world, simple pleasures, time....you can add your own list, because many of our choices have been taken away. We will have the choice to shape our "normal life" according to these values in the future.

Following Jesus is an invitation to be guided by the Holy Spirit in choosing life with every decision we make. Jesus has shown us by his own life, what it looks like to be a human being who is fully alive – depending for his life entirely on God's love. He shows us that life in all its fullness, living abundantly, in God's terms, is not always popular and can run counter to a society's expectations – but ultimately it is a choice for an eternity of sharing the life for which God created us.

So finding what abundant life looks and feels like might start with noticing what gives you the deepest sense of meaning in life, and discovering that is where God meets you. Or it might start with noticing where your life looks a bit like the way Jesus lived and letting that guide you to becoming more like him in your own way.

Whichever route you take, may we each enter more fully into the gift of life we have been given this week, whatever it brings us, through the gate that Jesus offers us, listening for his voice and following where he leads in the knowledge that he knows us and loves us each by name, and will lead each us through his journey in the way that helps us come to recognise and love him best.

Merciful Father, you gave your Son Jesus Christ to be the good shepherd, and to lay down his life and rise again: keep us always under his protection, and give us grace to follow in his steps:  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

**Ever present God, Be our comfort in times of uncertainty, our stability in times of change, our peace through anxiety, our companion in all things. Amen**

Gospel Readings for the week to come:

Monday 4<sup>th</sup> May John 10:1-18

Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> May John 10:22-30

Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> May John 12:44-end

Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> May John 13:16-20

Friday 8<sup>th</sup> May John 14:1-8

Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> May John 14:7-14