

Sermon May 3rd 2020 Easter 4 BCP (Lockdown)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.

I've realised I'm listening to news bulletins these days as little as possible and avoiding the newspaper headlines altogether by skipping to the crossword and sudoku pages. This is not because I don't care about the pain and sadness of the personal tragedies that unfold each day, or the extraordinary courage of ordinary men and women who, as keyworkers, now find themselves on the front line of battle against Covid-19. Of course, I care; of course, we care. It's simply that there are too many voices. First came the voices of trapped holiday makers telling of the worsening conditions aboard large cruise ships. Then came the voices of authority, scientific voices, governmental voices, even military voices, all telling us loudly what to do, what to fear, what to wear and pronouncing changing facts and figures. The noise, the cacophony becomes too much to bear and I just want to put my hands over my ears. I long for a still, small voice of calm.

Voices feature in both our readings today. St John's gospel centres on a parable Jesus told; a parable about sheep kept in a sheepfold, presumably for their own safety. Entry and exit is through a single gate, and the only person who has access to the gate is their shepherd, the one whose still, calm voice they know. Thieves and robbers will try to access the sheep, but to no avail because the sheep will not respond to unknown voices.

As the Covid-19 pandemic has turned our lives upside down, so did Jesus' ministry affect the lives of his disciples. Having left their homes and families to lead a nomadic existence alongside him for almost three years, they still questioned who he was. Was he really the messiah or just another prophet? Was he the Son of God or not? Many voices, Roman voices, some from among the religious authorities, even voices from the Scriptures, were telling them so many things, but the disciples remained uncertain and puzzled. The parable was Jesus' response.

Like most Jews, the disciples would have been familiar with the good shepherd metaphor found so often in the Bible, especially used as an illustration of ideal kingship. Since the time of King David, the idea that a true king nurtured mutual love and trust between himself and his subjects was well understood. But when Jesus spoke of false shepherds and gates, the disciples found it hard to understand.

Jesus was pointing them of course to look at what was happening. People were hearing him and were inspired to follow him in trust. His authority came not through earthly power, but through service to those to whom he ministered with

a love that was palpable, encompassing and healing. And just as the gate to the sheepfold was a means of keeping sheep safe, guarding their going out and coming in, so Jesus' still, small voice of calm pointed the way to the entry to God's kingdom, with all the safety and fulfilment which that offered. All these things were signs that God had sent him.

Turning to the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we discover that something has changed. The once doubting and questioning disciples are now a confident, hope-filled and prayerful community, using their own voices to bring many more safely home through the gate that Jesus had shown them. Believing in him, teaching, praying and breaking bread together, his voice has become their voice. The disciples have been transformed. How, in the middle of political and spiritual upheaval, and against a background of many conflicting voices has that happened?

Through every aspect of his ministry, Jesus wanted his disciples to begin to realise that he had provided all they needed to answer their own questions about him. However, we know that it took them much more, including the crucifixion and the resurrection, to reach certainty, to reach the point where they recognised him as their shepherd and their gate and knew his voice above all others; the still small voice of calm. Only then were they empowered to use their own voices to proclaim to others the good news of his kingdom.

Confronted with an enemy like the virus we face, the voices of authority are pulling us this way and that and there is no certainty, no end to not knowing. Certainly, the advice given and followed has saved many lives and for that we are grateful, but the reality is that there are no certain answers to the questions that now face us. We are isolated, restricted, in grief and fear. Our churches are closed and, as Christians, we are unable to share physically in the Eucharist. We have unanswered questions about the future, our well-being, about what is happening and where it will all lead.

However, like the disciples, we have everything we need to answer our own questions. We have Jesus' teaching and we have the example of the disciples to guide us. In the power of the crucifixion and the resurrection, we are his Easter people, full of hope and joy. The reading from Acts shows us how to be church, no matter that our buildings are locked. We believe in Jesus and know him to be with us in every situation. We can, and do, continue to teach, to learn and to pray, on our own in our homes and, through the wonders of modern technology, together. We share fellowship not only with our regular congregation, but more widely now, with those who may have been afraid to enter a building but are not afraid to log-on. Our homes have become the place of breaking bread as we share virtually in the Eucharist and make Spiritual Communions. The physical door

may be locked, but the gate to God's kingdom is open wide and our voices are encouraging people to enter.

Just as in that early church, "signs and wonders" are seen daily, performed by those working within the NHS and others. "Glad and generous hearts" are fund-raising, supporting front line workers, caring for the elderly and sick, doing myriad small acts of kindness. In truth, there is evidence that we are transformed, we are using our voices for God's glory. How can all of this be?

Perhaps it's that we've blotted out all the noise around us, from voices that distract us, in order to listen to that one voice we know so well; the voice of our shepherd, the voice of our gate keeper, Jesus' voice, the still small voice of calm. In the midst of chaos and confusion, let's listen to his message of hope, of love and of peace. May we ask, that having listened and been blessed, we are given the grace to use our voices to share Jesus' message with a world that needs it so much.

Amen