

Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> April

Acts 2:42-end

1 Peter 2:19-end

John 10:1-10

I am in deep awe of those people who can listen to a bird sound and immediately with total confidence say what species of bird it is.

Even with an app on my phone that records bird sounds and compares them with its inbuilt database, I still find it virtually impossible.

I have just about mastered the Great tit (sounds like a squeaky bicycle pump) and I recently learned the chiff chaff (the bird that says its name over and over again). I'm almost certain when I hear a blackbird. But after that its little more than guesswork.

(btw this afternoon's forest church is about birds )

When we've been out walking recently we have been through many fields full of sheep and young lambs. As we walk through the field all I can hear is the sound of a lot of lambs bleating. They all sound the same to me. But the ewes can immediately tell which is their lamb, and can also tell if the sound the lamb is making is a cry for help.

I suppose it's a bit like a parent being able to hear their own baby's cry in a roomful of other children. Surprising but true.

Or you being able to hear someone your name being called even if its across a crowded and noisy room.

In our gospel reading Jesus is talking about sheep, shepherds and the voices the sheep recognise and respond to.

*The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. 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. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.'*

We might think that Jesus used images of shepherds and sheep because he was teaching people in a rural setting. And I am sure that is true. But there is another reason too.

If we look at this passage in its biblical context we would see it comes directly after the healing of the man born blind (in chapter 9 of John's gospel). Now, I find it hard to read that particular story without seeing Margaret Priddey act it out in our Easter Journey play. It's the story of Jesus healing someone who is blind but doing so on the sabbath; the religious leaders objected to this and threw the blind man out of the synagogue.

And here in chapter 10, immediately after that story, Jesus starts talking about sheep and shepherds. As he spoke about sheep and shepherds the people would not only have thought about woolly animals and men holding crooks. In the Old Testament – the Bible the Jewish people had – the relationship between rulers and the people was often pictured in terms of shepherd and sheep. David the ideal king was a shepherd, and as he became king he modelled his kingship on the relationship between a shepherd and the sheep. Caring for, protecting, and nurturing. And the religious leaders too were often thought of in the same way. Shepherds caring for their sheep.

There are many texts in the OT that pick up these kind of themes, including Ezekiel ch 34 which talks about how the shepherds – the religious leaders, the king and all those in authority – had all failed in their tasks, their responsibilities. Instead of protecting those in their care they had led them astray. Led them into danger, away from the truth of God and the worship of God.

And so here, immediately that Jesus started talking about shepherds, the people would know he was criticising those in authority. The very religious leaders who had just been criticising him for healing on the sabbath.

In effect in our gospel reading this morning Jesus is asking about who we actually listen to. Who do we pay attention to? Who guides us as we make the decisions – both the big ones and the everyday ones. Do we listen and follow the voices that lead us astray from truth or do we listen to the voice of the good shepherd. The one who “calls his sheep by name and leads them out”.

All around us there are voices. On the TV, in the newspapers, in advertisements, our neighbours, our friends and family. How do we know which are the voices to listen to, to pay attention to, to respond to and which are the voices to be wary of?

The obvious and simplistic answer is that we should listen to the voice of Jesus. But how do we know what that is? How do we know if the words we hear are his words or the words of others? After all he doesn't speak to us in the same way as the news commentators or celebrities on TV do.

But there are many ways that Jesus can and does speak to us.

Through the Bible. I hope that reading the Bible is a regular part of your Christian life. Some people read a Bible passage every day – a bit like we did in Lent with the Dust and Glory booklets, and are doing so again as we prepare for the Coronation with the Daily Prayers for the Coronation. But this can be hard. The Bible is not an easy book to read – in fact it's a collection of “books” of different genres. It is best not to be read like a novel or a magazine article. If we want to hear the voice of God through the Bible we must read it prayerfully and expectantly.

Or maybe you would find it easier to talk with others about Bible passages. Our JOT group on a Wednesday afternoon or the monthly evening group (this coming Wednesday) could help you there. We read something from the Bible together and then think, talk and pray about it. We often find that this helps us hear God speaking more clearly.

We can also hear Jesus speak through the words of others. We were thinking about this last week as we read the story of the walk to Emmaus. How through our conversations with others as we walk and talk and do things together we can hear the voice of Jesus speaking through them.

We can hear his voice through prayer as we listen to what he says – perhaps in the silences through his Spirit.

We can hear the voice of Jesus through circumstances – things happening that point us in certain directions. Maybe confirming our original thoughts, maybe changing them.

We can hear the voice of Jesus through books, or music, or art. Through anything really. Which is not surprising as the whole of creation and creativity comes from him.

And we can measure what we hear against what we know of Jesus through the whole Bible, through the stories we know so well. He is not going to contradict himself.

Of course its not always clear cut. Currently, for example, Christians are trying to seek the voice of Jesus as we think about how we proceed regarding same sex relationships. And devout Christians are coming down on both sides. In such situations we can only judge by our own interpretation of scripture, of traditions and what we believe the Spirit of God is saying to us.

As well as listening to the voice of Jesus, we need to be willing to respond to it. It maybe that we are hoping he gives us the answer to an issue we are facing up to. It may be he says something out of the blue as it were. But is there some action we need to take? Is there something he wants me to do, or say? Or someone he wants me to visit or phone or pray for? Or a new task he wants me to take on? Or something he wants me to stop? How does he want me to respond?

The sheep follow the good shepherd because they know his voice

As we journey on in our Christian faith we will begin to recognise the voice of Jesus as we pray, as we read his word, as we talk to and listen to others and as we reflect on our own experiences. As we grow in our faith we will find it easier to distinguish his voice and then to act on what we hear, as we follow him. And as we do that we will find that we have the abundant life he talks of and promises.