

Fourth Sunday of Easter 2017

Father Peter Groves

John 10.1-10

he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. John 10.4

How well do we hear? How do we know that what we think we are hearing, is actually real? How do we identify the voice which we should obey? Jesus tells us that the shepherd is known to the sheep because they recognise his voice. Do they do so because of what he actually says, or because of the voice itself? Would they recognise him as easily if he addressed them on the details of ovine zoology? It seems unlikely. Words and voice, presumably, need to go together. Some time ago I found myself delivering a sermon written by someone else, by Mthr Jenn Strawbridge, in fact. She was unwell, and I was given the text and asked to read it out. It was, of course, excellent, but it was clearly written for her voice. At more than one point I found myself improvising changes as I went along.

When, for example, I used the phrase “His CV is remarkable”, I took the chance to look up at the congregation and tell them that, in the original Texan, the words were “His resume is awesome”!

The sheep follow him, for they know his voice. But it's not on the voice alone that Jesus analogy depends. The things that people do are also important. The one who wishes to harm the flock by stealing from it, will climb in surreptitiously. Only the shepherd, who has the care of the sheep, will enter by the gate, and the gatekeeper will open only to him. He is able to lead the sheep out from this place of safety and security, and his shepherding of them will keep them safe, because they recognize his voice and, by following him and staying together, they remain secure. If, on the other hand, the flock is attacked by a stranger, the sheep will scatter in fear and rather than enjoy the security of the flock, each will be left individually helpless.

Jesus then uses another image. Not only does he enter by the door, he is the door. The picture here is of a circular sheepfold with a high fence or wall, and a small gap for entrance and exit. The shepherd would guard the sheep by sleeping across the point of access, by making himself the door, so that any animal or robber which sought to attack the flock would have to attack the shepherd first. The sheep being his livelihood, he will defend them with his life. His presence is the guarantee of the flock's safety both within the haven of the pen and also on the journey to the pasture in which they will find nourishment.

So the characteristics of the shepherd are unfailingly positive: safety, protection, care, intimacy, and sacrificial love. And the adjective in English which means shepherd like is the word *pastoral*, a word used frequently in a Christian context. The church thus identifies the shepherd as its principal image of what the world now calls leadership. John 10 gives us description of calling and following, and also the pattern of the one true

pastor. It's the combination of those themes which has led the Western church to take this fourth Sunday of Easter, when we read the gospel of the Good Shepherd, and call it vocations Sunday.

The church is not always terribly good at discussing vocation. We use the word vocation to mean "a calling to the priesthood". This is quite wrong. That is one vocation, among many others. We also use the word vocation, as if some people have one, and others don't. Also quite wrong, because vocation is simply a calling, and all Christians are called. We also talk about the need for an increase in vocation. Again, wrong, because God does not need to be told by us how to run his church. There can't be a shortage of vocation, only a shortage of discernment.

The good shepherd whom Jesus describes is far from the so called strong leader so fetishized in our world. Whilst it is true that there is some physical leading being done in the pictures Jesus paints,

the proper role of the pastor in the New Testament is clearly very far from the heroically authoritative individual that the world expects leaders now to be. As we are reminded of the gospel, so we are reminded that all pastoral ministry is merely a sharing in the shepherding of Christ, that first and foremost we are all sheep of his flock and following his lead and his voice, whilst also being the objects of his intimate and ultimate love. The contrast between the shepherd and the thief is not a contrast between a good and bad pastor, it is a contrast between that which is of God, and that which is not. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy: I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Jesus teaching about himself as the good Shepherd places at the centre of a pastoral role the willingness to place one's whole life at the service of others. The good Shepherd, lays down his life for the sheep. It is this example of self-giving which we are to follow. To anybody called to pastoral care

– which is all of us, at some time or other - the vocation to discipleship, to learn from Christ, is just as important, because care for his flock must follow his pattern, simply because the flock is his. But as well as learning, pastors need also to follow the good Shepherd. A priest, for example, is no less a Christian than any other member of the church. Clergy are never better Christians than those to whom they minister, but there is a particular responsibility of the pastor, the one who leads the flock, and it is one we only fully realise when we reflect on our common vocation to follow.

What does leading look like? One person, out in front of a larger group, moving forward clearly so that that larger group can proceed along the same path. Now imagine that that's larger group is one of many groups, all of which are following a principal leader or pastor, at the head of the whole collection. It is this leader, who should be the true focus. Those who are following after him themselves leaders and pastors, because they guide a particular flock. But their most important

responsibility is not in fact making sure that the flock can follow them clearly, but that the flock can follow clearly the chief pastor, the true leader.

One very important conclusion from all this is that it will always be the responsibility of the Christian leader or pastor not to get in the way, not to obscure the vision of Christ upon which all Christians must focus. If the local pastor becomes the focus, then the true pastor has disappeared. The love of God is never obscured by God himself but only by the limits of earthly reality. If we cannot see Christ clearly it may well be because we are creating obstructions.

Leadership is among the most dangerous words used by Christians, dangerous because it can stand so squarely in contrast with the example of Christ himself. If leading and calling and following are to be done, they must be done with the vision of the true leader, the true shepherd, set before us. And that vision is not of grandeur, not of

importance, not of ambition. It is the vision of a cross, and of an empty tomb.