



Sermon: - 17th April 2016

The Shepherd's Voice

Just around Easter time a few years ago there was a series of three programmes on television on a Sunday night. They were called the "Son of God", and they were fascinating. Before he made the programmes, the presenter, Jeremy Bowen, had not believed that Jesus had existed - he had always assumed that there was no historical evidence to back it up. In doing his research for the programme, however, he discovered that not only was there evidence to prove that someone called Jesus had indeed lived and died in Palestine all those years ago, but also that there was in fact evidence to back up some of the stranger stories which surrounded his birth and his life.

The star at his birth, for instance. There is evidence to show that there was indeed an unusually bright star in the skies around the time we believe that Jesus was born. What's more, for those who study such things and believe that the heavens and the stars hold omens for life on earth, this bright star represents royalty. In the end Bowen concluded, there could be no doubt that Jesus existed, but the question which remains unanswered for Bowen is the same question which the Jews asked Jesus in our reading today. Was Jesus the Messiah?

Throughout his ministry, those who meet Jesus grapple with the question of his identity.

Only once — to the Samaritan woman at the well — does Jesus acknowledge openly that he is the Messiah. In every other situation he urges his listeners to use their ears and eyes. The truth, he suggests, is clear enough for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. For example, he speaks of himself as the bread of life immediately following the feeding of the five thousand. And before he heals the man born blind he calls himself the light of the world. His works are practical, life-giving expressions of his words. His actions demonstrate his claims.

In today's Gospel, those who confront Jesus in the Temple cannot accept that Jesus is the Messiah... they cannot because (it seems) they will not. They refuse to accept the evidence of what they have seen or what Jesus has said.

'Jesus, if you're the Messiah, just tell us, just say it!'

When Jesus responds you can sense his frustration — and perhaps his sadness too. 'I have told you and you do not believe ... the things that I have done in my Father's name should be proof enough, but still you do not believe me.'

And then he goes on to tell them why they do not believe him and this is particularly interesting; 'you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.'

It is as if he is putting people into two separate groups. There are those – like his accusers in this incident – who keep asking questions and demanding proof, and yet will not accept the answers or believe the evidence of their own eyes. On the other hand there are those who have heard his voice and followed and in following discover the evidence for what they already believe.

It is as if Jesus is saying, asking questions, demanding proof is not the way to find faith. Evidence confirms faith, it does not create it!

He is saying, 'I have told you and I have shown you. If you keep hanging back, putting off the decision, asking for more evidence and waiting for proof then you will never believe. Those who believe are those who hear my voice and choose to follow me. They are my sheep and I am their Shepherd'.

I am reminded of the story of an American tourist who was travelling in the Middle East. He came across several shepherds whose flocks had become mixed together while they drank water from a brook. After the shepherds and the tourist had exchanged greetings, one of the shepherds turned toward the sheep and called out, "Manah. Manah. Manah." Manah means "follow me" in Arabic. Immediately his sheep separated themselves from the rest and followed him.

Then one of the remaining shepherds called out, "Manah. Manah." and his sheep left the larger flock to follow him. The traveller then said to a third shepherd, "I would like to try that. Let me put on your cloak and headdress and see if I can get the rest of the sheep to follow me."

The shepherd smiled to himself as the traveller wrapped himself in the cloak, put the headdress on his head and called out, "Manah. Manah." The sheep didn't respond to the stranger's voice. Not one of them moved toward him. The sheep did not follow him because they did not recognise his voice.

In her book *The Preaching Life*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a conversation she had with a friend who grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest. According to him, sheep are not dumb at all. "It is the cattle ranchers who peddle that myth, and all because sheep do not behave like cows. Cows are herded from the rear by hooting cowboys with cracking whips, but that will not work with sheep at all. Stand behind them making loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you, because they prefer to be led. You push cows, her friend said, but you lead sheep, and they will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first - namely, their shepherd - who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right."

Sheep know their shepherd and their shepherd knows them.

Her friend went on to say that "it never ceased to amaze him, growing up, that he could walk right through a sleeping flock without disturbing a single one of them, while a stranger could not step foot in the fold without causing pandemonium."

We are the sheep. We have chosen to follow Jesus and we see and believe the evidence of our faith as a result of our choice. However, choosing to follow is not a once for all decision. We continue to be called. But how do we hear the voice of Jesus? Martha has brought up a large family single-handed on a run-down estate in a big city. When asked how she copes, she replies, 'When I have any problems I open my Bible, and pray.' Robert was a successful businessman with everything he thought he wanted. One evening while walking the dogs, he sat down to look at the view. In that quiet time he became certain that he was called to be a priest. Donna had never held a job for long, but when her son started school she began to help in the classroom. One day the headteacher asked, 'Have you ever considered becoming a teacher?' Those words set her off on a career she would never have considered before.

Jesus calls those who hear into new life and to share it. The prayerful reading of Scripture guided Martha as she brought up her children and inspired her to set up a drop-in centre for mothers and young children on the estate. Robert is now a much-loved parish priest, working in six scattered country churches. Donna's teaching career has brought fulfilment to her and countless young children.

We have chosen faith. We have followed the good shepherd. Is he calling us to more?

If we return to the story of the American Tourist, we find that, having failed to get the sheep to follow him, he asked the shepherd, "Will the sheep ever follow someone other than you?"

"Oh yes," the shepherd replied, "sometimes a sheep gets sick, and then it will follow anyone."

We have seen that, haven't we? People who are "sick", who are battered by the storms of life, plagued by difficulties and problems, and so often distracted by voices urging them to go this way and that. In the chaos that their life has become they have lost their bearings and they don't know where they are or where they are going. That sense of helplessness, of being overwhelmed by life, of the struggle to cope with unemployment, bereavement, sickness, can be more than a little frightening; it can lead to despair, to hopelessness. And when someone is desperate and unhappy, when they are "sick" they will follow anyone who will promise a moment of happiness or a brief feeling of peace or forgetfulness.

The call of our Lord is "hidden" in a whole chorus of worldly voices beckoning us, seducing us. Other would-be shepherds try to tempt us away from the Good Shepherd, from the joy of his forgiveness and the security of his love. And when we are weak and confused it is easier to fall victim to the enticements of other gods. And that is especially so for those who have never heard the voice of Jesus in the first place.

So perhaps one of the ways Jesus is calling us is to reach out to those who have not heard his voice, who are blindly following anyone who offers hope, however false or transient. This was a theme of the early church - the inclusion of those considered outsiders, sometimes beyond the pale, and I think Jesus continues to call us to include them today. In the early church, not only are those on the margins welcomed, they are brought into the centre.

In the same way, we are called to open our doors to those in our community who might make us uncomfortable, but who need to hear the voice of the good shepherd.

The call of Jesus the Good Shepherd is, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." The Old Testament writer put it even more clearly when he wrote, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." Jesus says it this morning, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me, and I give them eternal life." There is no better way, no greater truth, no happier life. Our Lord calls to us in love that we might follow him and asks us to take that love to others, that they too might follow him.