



Fourth Sunday of Easter

21st April 2013

Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23, Revelation 7: 9-17, John 10: 22-30

At yesterday's baptism, a seven-year-old called Keegan asked about the stained glass window. We had spoken of the central window that depicts the baptism of Christ – I like to draw their attention to the image that shows them as Jesus. He asked what the next one was and it is of course an image of Jesus, "The Good Shepherd".

The fourth Sunday of Easter is known as "Good Shepherd Sunday" due to the lectionary readings; the psalm, reading from Revelation and the gospel all refer to the 'shepherd' and with an obvious emphasis on Jesus as the 'good shepherd'. We can, however, ponder for ourselves, if we were the early Church where would we see the emphasis for today from the readings as presented to us? Did the 'Church fathers' deliberately discount the first reading because it centres on a woman, and one who was "*devoted to good works and acts of charity*"? Were they threatened by Tabitha usurping the centrality of men in the evolving Church?

We might also consider the model that has been constructed in giving Jesus a "good Shepherd" emphasis; has it been empowering for us or have we relegated the Church to the role and place of 'sheep'? Tradition is a two-edged sword; it can lock us into a past that we have both seen and moved beyond and so although we follow tradition we do so without any integrity of belief. Tradition can, however, also provide a foundation on which we continue to build, and so find its, and our, deeper integrity. Much of the Church retains a 'flat earth' knowing and a 'flat earth' tradition and yet we actually live in a differently shaped knowing. The tomb of tradition holds a valuable truth, but Easter asks that we roll away the stone and venture forth from the tomb into the garden beyond. And the actual physical shape of this place speaks of that same Easter movement.

At the centre of our faith we find Jesus, the Christ, as an icon of integration between humanity and humanity; traditionally in Christ, God and Man are one. And so the division between shepherd and sheep is looking for integration, looking to see itself "in Christ". Likewise the separation between God the Father and Jesus the Son is thrown away (or brought together) in the gospel reading; "[30] *The Father and I are one.*" The Divinity (the God) that Christ speaks of in his humanity is that which is to be realised in everyone.

Last Sunday's gospel, from the chapter before today's reading had Jesus saying "Follow me"; and in that address to the disciples, the sheep are called to be (become) shepherds. In the narrative of the Early Church, the Acts of the Apostles, we hear today of Peter (the icon of the church) bringing Tabitha back to life. It is hard to understand why the early church did not determine to make the Fourth Sunday of Easter 'get up Sunday', for in today's reading we see Peter 'following Jesus'; what Christ revealed in the raising of Lazarus, and what was revealed when the stone was rolled away on Easter morning, is now made real in the early church.

So do we remain as sheep or do we guide humanity, ourselves included, to the springs of water of life?

Some may find that a daunting question, and quite a challenge; actually it is the same for all of us. However, as we look more closely at life and at our lives, the path of integration, of following Christ, is no more challenging than any other life direction we choose to follow.

Yesterday's baptism was something that Keegan, a seven-year-old, had sought; he wanted to be part of the Church, even after assurances from his parents that he already was. He determined that Baptism was necessary to make that real in his life. **We** brought that reality to life for him. It was not a priest, or an event in itself, rather it was **our** "in Christ" role as shepherds that gave Keegan an opportunity to find that which he was seeking.

Later we had the church absolutely full to the brim for a wedding. Another of our life-giving ministries that bring new life and new creation into reality..

From both those two services, someone came and spoke of the "meaningfulness" they had encountered in the service; and they spoke with delight, an almost unexpected delight. They encountered something beyond their expectations. And perhaps that is our place, we live beyond the expectations of the world. It is easy for us to lose sight of our shepherding, when we come Sunday by Sunday as sheep grazing in the pews. But we are ALSO part of another reality, we are also shepherds in this community.

When a bomber places bombs on the finish line of a community marathon and kills and maims and creates fear, we readily see that life, the whole of life is diminished. Something is being destroyed and fear is generated, a fear that diminishes love, trust and life. But, so too all and everything, every word that we bring to birth in love, we are creative of life; and that light, freely given, is where darkness is dispelled.

Each of us are both sheep and shepherd, and we must break free from seeing ourselves as one or the other. How many leaders in the world are sheep being led by the shepherd of greed and power? How many in the church are sheep as priests and church leaders seek to prove themselves as shepherds? We are each, and all sheep and shepherds. As sheep we give thanks for those who guide and give to us. And as shepherds, we follow Christ and give of ourselves.

So, we might well be asked, are you the body of Christ? Tell us plainly! And our reply, like that found in the gospel today is very much made real by our actions: "*The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me*"; The works that we do in my Father's name testify to me.

If we leave today as "Good Shepherd Sunday", then let's make sure it is ourselves that we celebrate. And If we seek to rename it "Get Up" Sunday, then again let it be us (each and all) that go forth from here and raise the dead.

Amen
Peter Humphris