

Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 3rd May 2020

Safe in the Sheep Pen



A Gathering Prayer from the Roots Resources

Jesus says, 'I am the gate.'

Come, and be loved.

Come, and receive peace.

Come, and find life.

Amen

Lectionary Readings:

Acts 2 v42-47 (p1094) The Fellowship of the Believers

Psalms 23 (p555) The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want.

1 Peter 2 v19-25 (p1218) Submission to Rulers and Masters

John 10 v1-10 (p1076) The Shepherd and His Flock

Finding Pasture

This week our focus is on what it means to have abundant life.

Jesus speaks of a shepherd whose sheep know his voice and follow him away from danger. The Pharisees do not understand that Jesus is referring to himself. He also says that he is the gate of the sheepfold, and whoever enters by him will be saved.

We read in Acts that many people were coming through baptism into – what? Certainly not into an institution. Perhaps it would be truer to say into a new movement.

In this passage, the followers of Jesus are described as spending a lot of time together in the Temple in Jerusalem, but they are not planning a new Temple or rejecting the Jewish traditions that they have grown up with. What has changed here is the quality of their common life: sharing material wealth, eating together, living with glad and generous hearts, praying and experiencing signs and wonders performed by the apostles. Their community is strong, but it is porous. They do not define themselves by their borders, by articulating who does not belong with them, or who is the 'other'. Rather, members are constantly inviting and welcoming others, so that more and more people are added every day. The writer of 1 Peter encourages his readers to live a life of integrity, holding true to the values of their faith in the midst of suffering – perhaps a good lesson for us in this difficult time. It is not that he is promoting suffering as a good thing in itself, but if

you have to suffer, make sure that you suffer for doing the right thing, not the wrong. Do not buckle in the face of persecution so that you tell lies or threaten others or become violent or abusive. Remember the example of Christ who, under the most extreme suffering, never became less than the person he was. There was no deceit, abuse or threat in his mouth because he entrusted himself to God. This suffering with integrity and trust had a deeper meaning, for he was able to carry our sins for us. This was at a great personal and intimate cost, for he 'bore our sins in his body' and gathered up those who became his followers as if he were a shepherd gathering up straying sheep. The mystery of redemption is that somehow, by his wounds, we are healed. This pattern of steadfast and redemptive love and trust, even in the face of death, is the pattern that the writer commends to his readers.

The reading from John's Gospel is addressed to the Pharisees because they have been disputing his authority in the previous chapter; they were very suspicious when he healed a man born blind. So we need to hear the opening words of this passage: 'the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate...' as both a challenge and a warning to teachers and leaders. When it comes to guiding and caring for people spiritually, Jesus is uncompromising: there are those who approach by the gate and whose voice is recognised by the sheep, and there are those who climb in another way, with the intention of exploiting the sheep by stealing, killing and destroying. The sheep will not follow a stranger, but they recognise the voice of the shepherd. Is this perhaps a reflection on the crowds that follow Jesus, feeling instinctively that his teaching brings them closer to God? Are the people like sheep, allowing the shepherd to guide them to pasture? The Pharisees here will not do anything as simple as

listen; they are more fearful of their own authority being usurped than they are thankful that a man has been healed.

In John's Gospel, the speeches given by Jesus often move in a kind of spiral – they mention an idea, move on to a second idea, and then spiral back to a fuller understanding of the first idea. This speech has that kind of pattern: Jesus moves from the image of entering by the gate to the image that he himself is the gate. He is both the shepherd with a voice that the sheep recognise and the actual gateway in and out between safe pasture and the protection of the sheepfold. When he summarises what he has come to give, he calls it abundant life – a life so full of life that there is some to spare.

The links between the readings

These readings describe a community of faith living together with a clear identity. This identity can be known through their relationships with one another, their shared moral character when under pressure and their willingness to listen for and recognise the voice of Jesus. It does not reside in a dress code or a religious strapline, but in the quality of their common life. We may be 'apart' in this time of lockdown, but we are together in our church family identity. We can still share in our thoughts, prayers, fellowship & love for each other.

A Sending Out Prayer

Go out into the world.

Go where God leads you.

Go that you may serve him.

And wherever you go, know that God is with you.

Amen