

Easter 4 sermon by Andrew 12th May 2019 Named and Known

Acts 9: 36-43; John 10: 22-30

I love that bit in the Messiah where Handel makes the choir actually sound like sheep. All we like sheep have gone a stray-ay-ay-ay-ay-ay- we have turned every one to his own way. And the old prayer book confession used to remind us that we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep; we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts and there is no health in us.

Jesus himself grieves for us in our lostness when he says: You're like sheep without a shepherd. If only you would know the things that make for your peace.

Sheep of course get a bad press. In the film, "Babe", Babe, the amazing sheep-herding pig has a terrible time getting co-operation from the sheep. Because they don't seem to know what's for their own good. Which is a lot like us at least some of the time.

And in a way this talk of sheep and shepherds is very counter-cultural. This is the "because I'm worth it" generation, in which my individuality is almost a religion. But when people are trying to sell us things we get treated like sheep in the worst possible way. The assumption is that you only need some super-star to endorse something and the rest of us supposed individuals will follow, just like sheep.

But what Jesus is talking about is an image of shepherding, leading to living water, that really does take our uniqueness seriously.

Which is what we see in Peter. Last week we saw that beautiful, powerful confrontation with the Jesus who's come looking for him: Simon, do you love me? And he turns him, after all his ups and downs, into a shepherd and a good shepherd too: Feed my lambs, tend my sheep.

So when the call comes to go to Dorcas (Tabitha's her Aramaic name) this shepherd needs no second telling. And Luke, the author of Acts, ever the compassionate one, spares no detail in saying what Dorcas means for this community. Even the things she's made are shown to Peter, so he knows just how cherished she is. So that when he raises her, he raises her with a word of love. He speaks her name and her name apparently means gazelle, so it's almost like she's called back to live on with grace and beauty and a new energy to carry her life and her good works into the future.

Dorcas isn't just one more healing on a list. She's a person. And she's not just put in the story to make a point or show how amazing Peter is. And if you think about it most if not all of Jesus's encounters with people give us a real sense of the person, a sense of their story. There's the poor woman with the issue of blood who just wants to touch the hem of Jesus's robe, there's the demoniac who's forever breaking his chains and gashing himself with stones, there's blind Bartimaeus (Son of David have pity on me), there's the man

who has such good friends that they'll break through some poor guy's roof to lower Jesus into the room for him to heal him, and there's Zacchaeus the tax collector who gets a whole new way of life – I'm coming to your house today, Zachaeus! All of these are not just bit players in some great drama, sort of like second spear in a Shakespeare play.

They matter. Jesus notices them. He encounters them in their different personalities and he even jokes with them – like the woman at the well with the five husbands. With every person he encounters Jesus models that good shepherding that makes the person feel with every fibre of their being that they're known. "Come and see someone who told me everything I ever did," says that Samaritan woman. At first she wasn't sure at all that she wanted to be known, but in the end she's gobsmacked that this Jewish superstar rabbi can make her feel as if she's the only person in the world.

The best thing I've seen on TV in a long time was a programme this week about a Dementia Choir. What you saw was people whose own grip on memory and identity is slipping away from them, but held in the love of carers, families, partners who go on knowing them and naming them, calling them by the names they've always had, loving them still even as they might be changing and not seeming so much like the people they've been before. They sang the Beatles song, "In my life" and I found myself sitting there in tears: "There are places I'll remember all my life, though some have changed. Some forever, not for better, some have gone and some remain." They stood, or sat in wheelchairs, some of them heartbreakingly young and sang their hearts out on the stage of the Nottingham Concert Hall, whilst the people who love them sat in the audience and wept. That's the shepherd love that knows you and names you and never lets go of you. This is the love that won't allow you just to disappear just because you lose the place in the world that you used to have.

So can we give each other that kind of shepherd love? Mother Teresa used to say that loneliness is the poverty of the West. There's so much isolation. So the invitation, I guess, is to make each other feel that we're noticed. You know how sometimes you're speaking to someone and it's absolutely clear that they're really looking past you – like there's someone more interesting standing behind you? Not Jesus, not this shepherd. God in Jesus crosses a universe of time and space to come looking for you, for me, as if we were the only one. God notices you. So can we be that kind of good shepherd for each other? Can we maybe, each day, try to make someone else feel that they are that special to us, that we notice how they are and what they mean for us? Can we call people by their name, and do it and mean it, like Jesus does? What a gift to each other that would be.