

Easter 4 – 03/05/20

Shirley Dudeney – Licensed Lay Minister

*Lord, Take my words and make them yours,
so that each of us would hear from you. Amen.*

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Peter and I are fans of ‘slow TV’.

These are programmes, where they follow a journey or a themes, usually with little or no commentary or music and you simply travel along at a slow place.

One of the early programmes followed a bus as it journeyed up Swaledale in Yorkshire, with passengers getting on and off; another early programme followed a narrow boat as it journeyed on the Kennet & Avon canal from Bath to the Dunas Aquaduct

More recently, in a slightly different format there was the Great Mountain Sheep Gatherer.

This programme followed a shepherd in the Lake District, as he and his fellow shepherds with their dogs, gathered the Herdwick sheep from the high fells of the Esk Valley, to bring them into the farm for sheering; something that was essential for the sheep's wellbeing.

We watched as each shepherd skilfully sent out their dogs to herd the sheep into groups from the craggy terrain; gradually these group were brought together and with the sheep dogs scurrying around behind the sheep, herding them along ancient sheep tracks they eventually descended to wider tracks which led to the farm yard where the shearers were waiting for them.

The shepherds were constantly calling to their dogs throughout the several hours that it took for the gathering to take place;

The shepherds were always behind the sheep...they followed the sheep.

Now even if you didn't see this programme, I hope that through other TV programmes such as '*One Man and his Dog*', *Country.file etc.* or indeed what you have seen and experienced while out in the countryside you will have some idea about how shepherds look after their flocks in this country.

Well if we are going to have any understanding of the gospel passage today, or indeed Psalm 23 which Stuart Townsend's song which we heard a little early, is based on...we have to put those images completely to one side.

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Shepherds in the Middle East did not, and do not follow behind their sheep.

In the Middle East the order is reversed... the shepherd walks ahead with the sheep following him.

It is only if with have this image firmly in our mind that passages such as today's gospel reading begin to make any sense to us.

Only if we have the correct image in our mind can we read the line

'he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice

With any understanding.

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To use a totally different, more domestic image

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A neighbour of mine has a cat called Mr Zippy

For reasons too complicated to explain here, Mr Zippy regularly visits my house.

When it comes time for Mr Zippy to return to my neighbour she stands at the end of her drives and calls him.

As soon as Mr Zippy hears her voice, his tail goes up and he runs toward her.

Mr Zippy knows his owners voice.

In our reading from John's gospel, Jesus is saying that his sheep, his people will follow him because they know his voice

Indeed, we the 'Jesus people', can only follow him if we know his voice

And learning to know his voice, is I believe an ongoing challenge for us all;

Learning, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit when it is Jesus speaking or when it is a 'thief or a bandit' speaking.

How we come to learn to hear Jesus's voice is an individual, lifelong journey we must all undertake if we are to become the people God intends us to be.

Now there are times when the words of the Bible can bring comfort and hope.

But there are other times when the words of the Bible challenge us; challenge us to take action, to do something...and I'd like to suggest that this is the case in this morning's Gospel reading.

The passage we heard read to us ends with those wonderful words of Jesus;

“I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly”

I say wonderful and they are wonderful words, full of promise and truth and hope...

but for many of us at the present time those words will feel like 'mocking' words

It doesn't seem possible to have abundant life

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Living as a person in a country which is in 'Lockdown'

Living as a person 'shielding' for 13 weeks

Living as a person bereaved who cannot be comforted by my friends and relations

Living as a person who has no source of income because are no longer allowed to work

Living as a person trying to work from home, home school their children and queue for 30 minutes at the supermarket.

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Yes my friends, at first glance Jesus's words would appear to be totally impossible and inappropriate at the present time.

And yet; and yet maybe there may be a gift to be found within 'Lockdown'; within 'Shielding'...within these non-normal times and very challenging times.

May it be that it is the non-normality of these times, the lack of opportunity to meet with friends, to go where we normally go, to live our 'normal' life ...that will give us the opportunity to learn how to hear Jesus's voice...maybe for the first time...maybe to hear it more clearly, more accurately than we have ever heard it before.

Let us take this opportunity to come closer to Jesus; to deepen our relationship with him by quietly spending more 1-1 time with him.

Talking to Him, yes; but also listening to Him, just as you might wait on a riverbank for a glimpse of a Kingfisher...wait in silent anticipation for the whispering of His 'still, small voice'

Talking to Him yes; but also looking out for His 'gifts of love' in the actions of others, in the beauty of what we see...albeit a flower growing in a crack of a broken pavement.

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Let us take the opportunity to learn how to follow the Good Shepherd who wishes to lead us to green pastures, to still waters, who wants to be alongside us when we have to walk along dark paths.

Let us say yes to the abundant life which Jesus offers us even when living in 'Lockdown'.

Amen