

25 April 2021: The Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 10: 11-18

The Good Shepherd and His Sheep - Michael Brown

A Conversation about Sheep

‘So tell me then, Jesus is a shepherd, have I got that right?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘And so does that mean his followers are sheep?’ ‘Right again.’ ‘Then, I’m not interested.’ ‘Why not?’ ‘Well it’s obvious isn’t it - sheep are stupid creatures, aren’t they?’ ‘Absolutely not!’ ‘I don’t believe you!’ ‘Don’t take my word for it - look on the BBC website.’

“Sheep are actually surprisingly intelligent. They have impressive memory and recognition skills. They build up friendships.”¹

‘OK, I was wrong about that. But even intelligent sheep have to obey their shepherd, don’t they?’ ‘Yes, of course.’ ‘Hm, obedience eh, I think I’d have a problem with that idea. I mean, nobody likes being told what to do nowadays’. ‘Possibly not.’

John’s Sheep

Or, to express these sheep abilities using words from today’s Gospel Reading: *‘I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me just as I know the father and the father knows me.’* (John 10: 14-15)

And from just before those verses: *‘He [the shepherd of the sheep] calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.’* (John 10: 3b-4)

¹ Yes, really so. Information adapted from the BBC Earth website.

Sheepfolds

A point about sheepfolds in biblical times which explains the reference to the shepherd (Jesus) calling his own sheep. The village sheepfold wasn't just for the use of one shepherd: several flocks could be put there together overnight for safety. In the morning the shepherd(s) (usually one man, sometimes two women), would call out. The flock would be small enough for the shepherd(s) not just to know them but to know each sheep by name. Each flock would then be lead away - no sheepdogs!

'Knowing' in John's Gospel

The noun 'knowledge' isn't found at all in John's Gospel but the verb 'know' occurs many times. And for John 'knowledge' isn't something abstract, it's 'personal knowledge'; most importantly in the sense of Jesus knowing the Father, Jesus knowing us and the amazing fact that we can know Jesus.

And again in John sometimes, 'know' is more or less equivalent to 'trust': *'We have come to believe and know you are the Holy One of God.'* - part of Simon Peter's reply in when Jesus asks if the Twelve if they also wish to go away (John 6: 67-8).

John's gospel is so much like an inspired patchwork quilt that trying to sum it up is difficult but 'knowing' is certainly one of the threads connecting its variegated episodes. Thus one way to describe Jesus' ministry as presented in this gospel is: the communication of the knowledge of God the Father.

And so when Phillip says to Jesus, *'Lord, show us the Father'*, it is hardly surprising that Jesus replies, *'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father'*. (John 14: part of vv8-9)

Now to speak of 'knowing' or 'trusting' Jesus may be for many of us a source of puzzlement or of embarrassment bringing to mind displays of hysterical emotion sometimes depicted in films about the worst aspects of religious behaviour. But if we go back to today's gospel reading, a more positive picture can be seen.

The idea that the church is the Body of Christ is familiar to us from the way Paul uses that phrase to describe the equal but different role each of us can play in the life of the church. Human beings communicate mostly by means of their bodies - hearing a particular tone of voice, seeing a particular facial expression - and so we can also take the phrase 'Body of Christ' to mean that the church is Christ's communication system.

Knowing Jesus: The Gospels

To paraphrase St Paul, 'If Christ had not been raised, the gospels would not have been written' - and neither would the rest of the New Testament. That much is obvious but it is easy to forget that it is the power of the risen Christ that speaks to us in scripture through the Holy Spirit. We all hear the same gospel passage. We each receive our own gospel message.

Knowing Jesus: The Eucharist

In the English language the word sheep is ambiguous; it can be singular or plural. When the 'little flock' (Luke 12:32) which is the church celebrates the Eucharist that ambiguity is overcome. We all receive the sacraments in a similar way but we each know Jesus individually; and Jesus knows each one of us as a separate person.

Knowing Our Names and Knowing God's Name

Now in scripture knowing someone's name isn't the same as when a class register is called out for the first time by a new teacher who hasn't met any of the students before and knows nothing about them. Verses such as '*Do not fear for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine*' (Isaiah 43: 1b) remind us that the God of the Bible is not an abstraction but an eternal presence who both knows our sins and cares for us despite them.

And so to conclude: the Christian name for God is: God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; God Three in One; the Holy Trinity - but that is the subject for another sermon.

NEH 45 'The King of Love My Shepherd is' H W Baker (1821-77)

1. The King of love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am his
And he is mine for ever.

2. Where streams of living water flow
My ransomed soul he leadeth,
And where the verdant pastures grow
With food celestial feedeth.

3. Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love he sought me,
And on his shoulder gently laid,
And home, rejoicing, brought me.

4. In death's dark vale I fear no ill
With thee, dear Lord, beside me;
Thy rod and staff my comfort still,
Thy cross before to guide me.

5. Thou spread'st a table in my sight;
Thy unction, grace bestoweth:
And O what transport of delight
From thy pure chalice floweth!

6. And so through all the length of days
Thy goodness faileth never;
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise
Within thy house for ever.

'Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. AMEN.

(Letter to the Hebrews 13: 20-21)