

Sunday 3rd May 2020 – Easter 4

Ps 23; Jn 10: 1 – 10

Hearing God's voice

In these days of mass communication when anyone can say what they like on social media, or mainstream media for that matter, it can be hard to know who and what to believe. Rumour, gossip, and fake news are an issue of course but just now we're also having to decide which of the 'experts' we can trust and believe. Was the 'herd immunity' strategy right or should we have gone into lockdown earlier? Should they ease the lockdown because we're all getting a bit tired of it now and we seem to have achieved the flattening of the curve or do they abide by their mantra to 'do the right thing, at the right time' and to listen to the science? Does wearing a mask in public have a benefit as some say, or very little effect as others say? Then, of course, there's the question of the economy and how much damage it can sustain. I do not envy Boris Johnson, Nicola Sturgeon or our MPs as they try to pick their way through the competing claims of experts to try to do the right thing for us all.

The 10 verses we read today from John's gospel are usually attached to the verses that follow them to round out the story of Jesus as The Good Shepherd. They are not just the prequel to that story though, they have an important message of their own. Jesus says:



...the sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him **because they know his voice**. (John 10 v 3b – 4)

'They know his voice'. That seems a little strange maybe to us who live in an age where sheep dogs and quad bikes are used to round up sheep but in Jesus's day the shepherd did all the work. He spent his time with the flock walking ahead of them talking to them as they followed his lead during the day. At night he would find a safe shelter for the flock and lay down at the entrance guarding them with his rod, something like an old-fashioned police truncheon, and his staff, used to help with handling the sheep and for protection. The sheep would become familiar with their shepherd's voice and presence. They trusted that he would find them good pasture to eat and water to drink, that he would protect them wherever they were and would always be with them. Does this all sound familiar?

David wrote what is probably his most famous psalm (Psalm 23) out of his own experience of shepherding using it to express his relationship with God. David knew that the only way to be able to follow God's path was to learn to recognise his voice, to know when it was God speaking. David seems rarely to hear directly from God but he knows God's laws and he recognises God's voice when various prophets speak to him. This, I think is what Jesus was telling us, we have to learn to recognise God's voice so that we can follow his guidance in our lives, the way to do that is to spend time with him, practise listening for his 'voice'

It would be so much simpler wouldn't it if we heard an audible voice from God but that rarely happens. A friend of mine likens listening to God to tuning a radio, you have to take the time to work through the fuzzy reception until you find the clearest sound, sometimes the tuning will be go off and you have to re-tune once more.

God knows each one of us intimately so that the way he communicates with us will be tailored to get our attention in the best way for us. With Moses he began with the burning bush, to David he spoke through prophets, with Jeremiah he used visual lessons like the potter with the clay, to Joseph (both Old and New Testament) God sent dreams, to others he sent angels.

When I was 18 I travelled by train from London to South Wales to start my time at teacher training college. From the station I got a taxi to the college, during that taxi ride I was completely overwhelmed by nerves and leant forward to tell the driver to turn around and take me back to the station, just as I did this we rounded a bend and I was confronted with



Those of you who are old enough may remember the Courage beer brand that was popular in the 1970s, pubs which stocked it often had this painted on their outside wall. I should probably say that I wasn't a beer drinker but God knew the words I needed at that time, I settled back in my seat, took some deep breaths and travelled on.

Some people need quiet and a time of meditation to help them 'tune in' to God's voice, others may need music or a time of worship, some hear his

voice through the words of scripture, others just need to recognise that what they're seeing/hearing/experiencing is from God as I had to when I saw those words on the side of a pub.

Last week Christopher included in the newsletter some simple instructions for meditation, if you have never tried it I encourage you to give it a try. Whilst I value times of quiet and solitude with God that sort of meditation isn't quite right for me, I'm too much of a 'do-er'. I discovered though that walking a labyrinth allows me to have that sort of meditative experience.

Labyrinths have been used by Christians for centuries as an aid to prayer and meditation. The oldest known example of a labyrinth in a church is believed to date from the C4th and is found just inside the door of a church in Algeria.



This picture shows the famous labyrinth laid into the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France which dates from the late C12th/early C13th.

Unlike a maze you can't get lost in a labyrinth, it has a single path which twists and turns back on itself but has no dead ends, you simply follow the path to the centre and then back out again.

There are labyrinths in many churches and cathedrals in Britain but of course at the moment we can't visit them. On the other side of this page is a finger labyrinth which gives a taste of what it's like to walk and meditate or pray a labyrinth. Try it and see if it helps you to tune in to God's voice.

We all need to find the way that works for us to hear God's voice above the clamour of our daily lives simply because his is the only voice that we can truly trust, the one who cares and wants only the best for us. Even in these unsettling days we can remember and rely on the promise God gives us through David in Psalm 23 v 4:

Even when I walk through the darkest valley,
I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.
Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.

Helen Evans.

Using a Finger Labyrinth

Sit comfortably with the labyrinth on a firm surface.

Using your index finger start where the arrow is, move slowly following the pathway. As you move towards the centre of the labyrinth allow the burdens you carry, the things that bother you to slip away, pass them to God, you can pause at any point if you want to.

In the centre, stop a while and just bask in God's presence.

When you're ready, begin to move slowly back along the path knowing that God is still with you, moving with you as you go back into the world.

