

John 10:1-6 – Sermon on Hearing

The next in our series where we are looking at our senses in worship is hearing. The reading for this morning is the start of a famous speech by Jesus in which he declares that he is the Good Shepherd, but we don't get to that bit today. Instead, we have sheep and their responses to hearing different voices.

Perhaps it seems obvious that we use our ears in worship. If you think about an average church service, you do some speaking, some singing, but a lot of listening too. Sometimes that listening is great – like when Andrew is preaching(!) - and sometimes, we react differently. Sometimes we hear something that makes us think and at other times we hear things and they go in one ear and out of the other. Sometimes, we hear and we agree and at other times, we hear and then dismiss what we hear as nonsense. Hearing depends on what is said, and then to how we process and approach what we receive. Just like the sheep in Jesus' teaching this morning, what we hear, and who we hear from, make a huge difference to how we react. So hearing in worship is important.

The context of today's reading is really significant. If you get chance, do read John chapter 9, as the preceding part of John sets the tone well for today's reading. Briefly then, in chapter 9, Jesus meets a man who was born blind and heals him, in an admittedly slightly strange way – but heal him he does. The scene proceeds to confusion, as the people who knew him, said it couldn't be the man because he was blind, whilst the healed man proclaimed himself the same guy, but healed. This dealt with, there is even more confusion, this time not about the identity of the healed man, but about the identity of his healer, Jesus, and the scandal of healing the man on the sabbath day.

The pharisaic inquisition interviews the healed man, who can only testify that he can now see and that seems like a divine act of healing to him. His parents, when cross-examined, basically affirm the identity of the healed man but then remove themselves from the firing line. The argument gets hotter and hotter until the healed man is thrown out. It turns out that a blind man could recognise who Jesus was, when the sighted spiritual teachers of the time could not. It's a big controversy, but really boils down to the expectations of the various people who met Jesus. By healing on the Sabbath, Jesus had effectively ruled himself out of the running to be anyone working on God's behalf according to the people who were trained in this stuff, whereas the healed man had no option but to believe.

So we move from blind people, to today's story where Jesus, as the good shepherd, is heard by his sheep. It isn't that the sheep see the shepherd and act; it is that they hear his voice. I've said before on another Sunday that the context of the Good Shepherd is in contrast to Old Testament images of bad shepherding on behalf of the religious and political elite. For example, in Ezekiel there is a damning prophecy against the leaders of the people who eat the sheep and fail to look after them. In talking about shepherds and sheep, Jesus is therefore using an everyday analogy which everyone would recognise, but at the same time chiming in with some old and important themes. It isn't an accident that in response to the controversy in the previous chapter, Jesus effectively attacks these religious leaders using the imagery of Ezekiel.

The situation boils down to one of recognition. The religious elite did not recognise God at work among his people because it didn't tally with their expectations and regulations. Consequently, they didn't recognise Jesus as the worker of God's healing since he had also done this on the sabbath.

So what does Jesus say in response? The story is about recognising the shepherd. In this tale, there is the picture of a large sheep fold with a doorway and someone guarding it. There may well have been multiple flocks sheltering within the same sheep fold as this was common practice – just like in Yorkshire you might see sheep with different colours of spray-paint on them indicating ownership by different farmers, but grazing in the same place.

The shepherd does not need to sneak into the fold, but instead enters through the front door having been recognised by the person guarding the gate. The thief obviously has to find another way in and so climbs the wall of the fold. The shepherd then calls to his sheep and leads them out to pasture, going ahead of them rather than driving them with a sheepdog as we are used to seeing. The sheep only follow him because they recognise his voice and because he calls them each by name. You can imagine the scene if a random stranger walked in and called the sheep; they'd just stand and stare blankly whilst chewing, and then run away if the stranger tried to approach them. They don't know the stranger's voice and so they won't follow him.

Much is made of this passage and the contrast between thieves and strangers – maybe they're both just sheep rustlers anyway, or maybe there's a stand-in shepherd who is a stranger. It doesn't really matter for today. There are several points that do matter.

Firstly, the good shepherd isn't a thief or a stranger and isn't a sheep rustler. The Old Testament imagery brings us to Psalm 23 where the Lord is my shepherd who provides, leads, comforts and so on. The behaviour of the shepherd has built a bond with the sheep so that when they hear his voice, they follow wherever he leads. The sheep are trusting, rather than making their own judgments about whether to follow the shepherd. It's a bit like when I'm walking the dog, Pepper comes to a stile in a field, or a fence, and if she hasn't been there before she waits until I say 'Up!' and then she'll jump. She jumps because she trusts that I know what she can do and since I think it is OK, it must be. It's the same kind of trust with the sheep.

For us, we hear Jesus' voice, in worship, in prayer or in reading scripture, and my suspicion is that we often react by weighing up whether Jesus is right or not, rather than following his lead. Now I'm not saying that we shouldn't discern well about whether we've heard right or read correctly, but as God calls us, we should be like the sheep, looking to trust our shepherd to guide us wherever we should go. We hear God's voice and follow.

Similarly, the sheep hear the shepherd and leave the fold. We don't just follow when we are out in the wilderness, but when we are in the fold – in comfort and surrounded by lots of other sheep and feeling secure. There will be times when God calls us and because it is God, we need to get up and leave the comfort zone and respond.

There may be other voices however – the stranger and the thief. Just as in Jesus' day, there were those who claimed to be the Messiah but weren't, and those who wouldn't recognise Jesus as who he said he was, so there are in our day. Particularly at the moment with Covid-19, there are voices that tell us to fear, or voices that belittle our following of Jesus as no more than a hobby, or as irrelevant and of no more importance than a sports club. These 'strange' voices are not the voice of Jesus. There are also voices which seek to steal over the wall of the fold – those of doubt or fear. These voices tell us that God isn't in control, or that Jesus isn't real or isn't trustworthy. These voices are the thieves seeking to steal from us the love of our shepherd.

So how do we recognise the voice of Jesus from amongst the other voices that we hear around us or within our own heads? Crucially, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows his sheep by name. Those voices of doubt aren't unique and tailored to us as individuals. They don't know us inside out. They don't

want what's best for us. They want to steal, to harm and to destroy. We are, each of us, uniquely known and loved by God and called through Jesus to be a citizen in God's kingdom and a member of his flock. Hearing the voice of calling is therefore individual and for our best. Those voices that steal us, are impersonal and drag us down, not lead us on.

Secondly, the voice of Jesus leads us. Jesus goes on ahead and we follow. It's all too easy for other voices to follow behind us, picking apart our failures, telling us we aren't good enough, picking apart our theology, perhaps attacking God for allowing Covid-19 to happen. These aren't voices which lead, these are voices which follow behind, trying to pick off those closest to the back of the flock. Jesus's voice leads us on, through the green pastures, by the still waters, and even through the valley of the shadow of death.

The voice of Jesus is individual – he knows us by name – and his voice leads us, not snaps at our heels.

In worship, we use our hearing, to hear about God, to engage with his people, sing with others, to pray together. But we also use our hearing to listen to what God has to say to us directly in prayer, reading the bible, talking with Christian family and friends. It is important that we hear his voice, trust and follow. It is also important that we listen only to our Good Shepherd and not give in to the voices of the sheep rustlers outside us, around us and within us. We seek to follow where Jesus leads, as he calls us by name. Amen.