

LISTENING TO THE SHEPHERD

Easter 4 Year B

Acts 4:5-12; Ps. 23; 1 Jn. 3:16-24; Jn. 10:11-18

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The beginning of each year, for some reason, always seems to be an incredibly busy time for a lot of people. Even for retired people, when you're supposed to be relaxing and enjoying the autumn years of your life—life instead seems to get busier and busier and busier. Indeed, for some, it seems to be the busiest time of their lives. And as I look around the congregation, those who are most involved seem to be taking on more and more.

I have felt the same way recently, particularly in the lead up to Easter—with extra services to prepare for, and all sorts of other things going on. (Bit more relaxed now that I've had a short vacation). Perhaps you too are feeling the strain of a life that's a whirl of activity—the tension of countless jobs piled one on top of the other—the exhaustion of going to bed at the end of the day without having had a real break during the day to allow you to relax and clear your mind—with no opportunity to spend just a little bit of time doing absolutely nothing.

I don't know why the pace of life seems to have accelerated beyond that which we normally, or used to, experience, but whatever the reason may be, for all the bustle and activity that so many of us are experiencing these days, one thing is certain—many people are finding little time for rest for themselves and are desperately longing for it.

The danger for all of us today is that, for many, the experience of our Christian faith and commitment is just the same as our experience of everyday life—that it too becomes a burden—one more set of tasks or activities that we have to perform—that when added to everything else you have to do, threaten to overwhelm you.

Unfortunately, a lot of people look upon the Christian life, and upon worship and involvement in the Church as being simply another bunch of things that they must do—as being simply another drain upon their already scarce physical, emotional, and spiritual resources.

Even ministers—those who have pastoral responsibility over God's flock—sometimes add to this feeling by telling us over and over again that we need to be busy about doing

God's business—by telling us what we need to do and what we should feel if we are to consider ourselves to be Christians, if we are to consider ourselves loved by God.

In all too many churches a lot of stress is placed on our knowing Christ and not enough on how he knows us—a lot of stress placed on what it is that we should do or not do if we are to be his disciples, and not enough stress is placed on the miracle of what it is that God does for us if we but simply trust in him and listen for his voice. But as those of you who know children would appreciate, it's very difficult to get their attention when they're busy doing something else. So it is with God's voice and our busyness.

In some churches, we are told that Christians must care for the world and be concerned about the environment—that we must be involved in caring for the refugees, and strive to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and bring justice to the poor. We are told what we can do for the whole world, but not what God wants to do for us.

In other churches, we are told that the faithful must tithe, that the truly dedicated must go to prayer meetings, and that those devoted to Christ will read the Bible and pray every day for at least an hour, and that furthermore they will be actively involved in all the groups within the church—either as leaders, or as helpers or as participants. We are told what a good Christian does for him/herself and for the church, and it's suggested or implied that God does nothing for us if we do not do these things.

In so many places we are continually told what it is we need to do, or what it is we should be doing—and while there is merit in much of what we are told, when it happens, the danger is that the good news of our faith, the gospel, will be lost. The gospel is lost whenever our actions are stressed and the love and the intercession of God in our lives is ignored or down played. The gospel is lost whenever our salvation and the salvation of the world, is linked to our activity, to what we do and feel, instead of being linked to the activity of God, and to what God feels and does for us. And we will end up being so busy doing things that we will not be able to hear God's voice when he calls to us.

The image of the shepherd is a very simple, but very profound one—one that expresses beautifully the truth of the nature of our relationship with God and highlights our need to listen to the voice of the shepherd.

Shepherding in the Middle East at the time of Jesus and before was very different than it is in other parts of the world today. Sheep were kept by their owners for years and

years—they were not animals slaughtered for their meat, but rather providers of wool. Shepherds led their animals—they didn't drive them, and they stayed with their flock both by day and by night, protecting them with their rod, a short knobbed club, from wild animals and robbers—of which there were many; and retrieving them from dangerous situations with their staff, a long pole with a crook in the end that could go around the animal's body and drag it to safety.

As I've said the shepherds kept their animals for many years—and so they came to know them very well—and the sheep in turn knew the shepherds very well.

The author H.V. Morton, a good friend of William Barclay, the famous Bible scholar tells the story of a scene he saw in a cave near Bethlehem.

Two shepherds had sheltered their flocks in the cave during the night. The next morning they were faced with the problem of sorting them out. One of the shepherds stood some distance away from the cave and gave a peculiar call which his sheep knew—for soon his whole flock had run to him, leaving behind the other shepherd with his sheep, who refused to come to the first shepherd because they didn't know him.

The shepherd's job, of course, is to protect and provide for the sheep. And that's what God does for us:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul: he leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. (Psalm 23:1-4)

Great words about the Lord—words that we do well to remember and take comfort from—for God, like a shepherd helps his sheep, he helps us. There is nothing that we need to do to receive that help. It is always there for us. It was won for us on the cross of Jesus, and secured for us forever by his resurrection.

God watches over and protects his flock. When we cry out—he comes to us, when we look for him—he is there to assist us, and when we are in danger—he rescues us—but the most marvellous thing of all is this—when we stray away from him, he seeks us out

and calls us to himself—he constantly strives to nourish us and bring us back to the safety and the comfort of his fold.

As the sheep of God's fold, it's so easy to get lost in our world, to run around doing things that must be done, and to lose track of where we are, and where we should be—and be so caught up in what we're doing that, not only do we not hear God's voice—the voice of the shepherd—but we don't hear anyone else's voice either—and we become isolated from the needs of others.

Following the Good Shepherd requires our never being too busy to be aware of and to respond to those around us who need help.

There is a true story that relates to the presence of the Good Shepherd in our lives.

A number of years ago there was a terrible fire in an apartment building in New York City. A little girl was trapped on the fourth floor of the building, perched on a window ledge. To make matters worse, she was blind. The fire fighters could not manoeuvre the ladder truck in such a way to reach the girl, so they set up a net and told her to jump. Because of her blindness she was too terrified to move. Then her father arrived on the scene. He shouted to her that he was here taking care of her and that she should jump when he said so. The girl did and was so completely relaxed that she didn't even break a bone or strain a muscle from the four-story fall. All because she trusted the voice that she knew loved her.

In the business of our lives, noise, distractions even calamities obscure the voice we need so desperately to hear—the voice of Jesus the shepherd. This is the voice of calm, the voice of reason, the voice of assurance, the voice of unconditional and unqualified love. This is the voice of Christ speaking to us in the quiet of our hearts, in the love of our family and friends, in the cries of all calling out to us. The voice of the Good Shepherd calls out to us calmly and lovingly. He calls us out of our busyness to rest in him—to put our trust in him in all that we do—because he is there taking care of us.

The Good Shepherd is the Risen Lord. He is with us. He will never leave us alone. Today let us ask this Lord to allow us to slow down and hear his voice.

To him be all glory honour, majesty and power. Amen.