

Fourth Sunday of Easter - Ascension 12 May 2019, John 10.22-30

Before a recent *"Who Do You Think You Are?"* film, journalist Jennifer Byrne knew that she was Victorian Governor Sir Dallas and Lady Brookes' granddaughter, but that was all. The program tracked her antecedence back hundreds of years to the great and the good in Merrie England and to the less great and the less good who oft times decreased by a head on the block.

Today, the Jews asked Jesus "Who Do You Think You Are?" "If you are the Messiah, tell us straight out. How long will you keep us in the dark?" In spite of their life-long studies, these supposed experts in Bible lore, had managed to keep God at enough of a distance to make any positive identification of God rather hazy. They, who should have known the divinity of Jesus from his authoritative personality, his riveting teaching and his miracle actions, did not really want to hear the truth, the truth Jesus had tried and tried to hammer home to make it crystal clear that "God the Father and I are one being." They had sapped their idea of God to the point where they could pay lip-service to God's Law and carry on regardless. They really only went to synagogue every Sabbath to receive an inoculation against getting the real truth. Not God's truth, their truth.

Jesus had come to shake their false notion of God. He faced them down. "I have told you, and you do not believe. Why? Because you do not belong to my sheep, no matter how clearly and plainly I speak to you. You are so completely blinded and deafened by your view of the nature of God, that I have little persuasive power with you. Regardless of what I say, you will not believe."

In the chapter before today's reading, Jesus healed a man born blind. The Pharisees could not rejoice in the wonder cure, but could only see that the healing was done on their sacred Sabbath. They disparaged Jesus and demonized him as a sinner possessed, who deserved to die. The blind man alone realized who Jesus was and accused the bigots: "Here is an astonishing thing. You bright sparks do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. God does not listen to sinners. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." Later, the now sighted man worshipped Jesus as Lord. To this, Jesus responded "I came into this world so that those who do not see/ may see."

There were little pockets of grateful recognition. Nathanael, praised by Jesus to be "without deceit," returned the compliment, "You, Jesus, are Son of God and King of Israel" [John 3.2]. The Samaritan woman at the well, proclaimed him as "prophet, Messiah" [John 4.19, 29], and her town community believed him to be "Saviour of the world" [John 4.42]. These certainly questioned the Pharisee closed mindedness, asking, "but how can someone whom you disparage as a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

Strange voices sometime tell us, that, to grow close to "Ultimate Reality," (the modern, all-inclusive word for God! Ultimate Reality), we must trek to a sonorous lamasery in high Tibet, or risk altitude sickness by climbing a windswept aerie to attain union with the Supreme Yoga Spirit. No! The Good Shepherd tells us today that everything merely depends on our belonging to him, that we are known and recognized by the Shepherd: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and no one can snatch them out of my hand." Do we tune in to the voice of the Good Shepherd in a relationship of trust, protection, and dependence, or are we fully tuned out to "good shepherd.com," today?

The voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice that frees us from the binding, tortuous shackles of the oppressive Old Law, which treasured the miniscule exactitude of its meaningless letter. Secure in belonging to the Good Shepherd, we become freed to live the abundant life that Jesus promises “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” [John 10.10]. He does not promise abundance in years, nor in wealth, nor in status, nor in accomplishments. Just look at me. Married to the Rev’d Canon Doctor, what am I, but, a mere preacher-peddler. The life that is abundant is a life abundant in the love of God, made known by Jesus, a love that overflows to others: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” [John 13. 34-5]. This abundant life is called abundant because its source is in God and in Jesus, who is the Resurrection and the Life [John 11.25]. Amidst all the other voices that may evoke fear, make demands, or, give advice, the voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice of promise, a voice that calls us by name, and claims us as God’s own.

Ever aware of our weaknesses, our tendency to wander, the Good Shepherd comes in search of the stray, the passed by, such as blind Bartimaeus, the passed over, such as the ten lepers. As he told us, last Sunday, Jesus calls us to be his Good Shepherds, to tend the sheep, to look after the Ascension pen-fold. Are we the Good Shepherds that Jesus needs us to be? Or do we leave the shepherding to “Leave it to Beaver” Jesus, satisfied that the love of Jesus is for us specious ones alone. No, in the beautiful reality of relationships, in the steadfastness of friends, we must call one another to life.

In our day, debate on Jesus’ identity continues. We largely grey-headed or balding spiritual people may try to adhere to a vaguely-defined higher power, whose relevance has been woefully devalued by the abusers convicted by the Royal Commission into paedophilia. Then there are those folk who claim to rely solely on science and reason and the sleepless on-surge of technological knowhow. These glibly, gullibly sweep into the dustbin any need for a comforting, misguided, deluded do-gooder like Jesus. Instead, they believe that the greater the advance in soulless science, the more can religion be rejected as a back number. Alas! the sacred name, among our young, has become little more than an expletive “Oh, my God!”

As Jesus learned, our preaching, our worship is not now enough to persuade the gospel sceptics of the Truth. He desponded “If I do the works of my Father, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know that the Father is in me, and I am in the Father” [John 10.37]. Jesus continued his discourse to promise “the one who believes in me, will do greater works than I do, because I am going to the Father” [John 14.12].

Let me give you a spooky f’instance: only last Tuesday, I visited an Anglican on my list at Cabrini. A patient, John, chatted about his past life, and casually dropped a name Barry N. He had been Barry’s boss here in Melbourne. John went on to reflect on their happy times together. “I’d really love to meet him again before I pass.” Some years ago, the self-same Barry N. had become a volunteer at Cabrini with Mary his wife. They are sometimes seen selling raffle tickets on the ground floor. When first he saw my name-tag, (this was the only reason we became more than nodding acquaintances) he said “I once met a nurse by that name in Calvary Hospital, Adelaide. Her name was Mary, like my wife’s, and she was very kind when one of our twin babies died.” Here was a chap speaking of a sad scene in an Adelaide hospital, now in another hospital, Cabrini, about my sister. I completed my rounds and went home. Later, that afternoon, an emergency called me back to the hospital. I came downstairs

and who had taken over the booth selling raffle tickets but Barry and Mary. As soon as I mentioned John and his bed number, Barry recited John's full name and shot upstairs. To me, that coincidence is too spooky for earthly-ness only.

"Our total weekly witness is crucial. If those around us do not believe the Gospel, and deride us as "Sunday morning Christians," perhaps they will believe on the basis of what we do, the witness/the example we offer, in the rest of the week. Anybody can observe the Sabbath, but, making it holy, takes the rest of the week...Are you up to the challenge this coming week? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory.