

Fourth Sunday of Easter Year A; 3rd May

Collect: Risen Christ, faithful shepherd of your Father's sheep: teach us to hear your voice and to follow your command, that all your people may be gathered into one flock, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Acts 2.42–end: ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Gospel Reading: John 10.1–10

¹ 'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷ So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Post Communion

Merciful Father, you gave your Son Jesus Christ to be the good shepherd, and in his love for us to lay down his life and rise again: keep us always under his protection, and give us grace to follow in his steps; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reflection

At times in our lives we may have found ourselves to be at the centre of something. Some do have a tendency to feel they are at the centre of things all the time, others can mainly feel on the edge; perhaps most of the time we are somewhere in between. Frontline NHS, care workers and others doing key jobs really are now at the centre of addressing the current pandemic crisis. Others also have important roles and there is a role for all of us even at the side of things including by our social distancing which is assisting the work of those at the centre of things.

In today's reading from John's Gospel Jesus is teaching from centre stage. Using the

analogy of a shepherd and a gatekeeper; he asks of his followers to notice the authenticity of the claim he makes; that he is giving them a greater understanding of God and that they are to reflect God's love for all in their lives. The passage is part of what is sometimes called Jesus' farewell message which is delivered to his followers in the upper room after he has washed their feet. From this lowly action comes his authenticity and his authority to inhabit the centre stage; the giving of a way to serve others.

Following the farewell messages, John, like the other Gospel writers, then describes and interprets the meaning of Jesus' dying on a cross. A sacrifice which confirms the authority and authenticity of God's love for humanity and which is interpreted as being the way that people are brought back to God.

Some talk and write about the Cross in very triumphal and victorious ways. But in worldly terms of power this is misleading. It shows disregard for the humiliation associated with being crucified and a disregard for the way that the death of Jesus identifies with all who have suffered or been killed unjustly. It was the religious leaders who were motivated by worldly ways of showing power. We find this in their emphasising that the killing of Jesus would quell rebellion. "Better for you that one man should die for the people than the whole nation be destroyed." John 11:50 A hymn by Brian Wren about the crucifixion begins "Here hangs a man discarded" and asks; "Can such a man of sorrows still bring a useful word when faith and love seem phantoms and every hope absurd?" ... I think the phrase about being discarded gives us an insightful perspective on Jesus' dying as taking place on the edge of things. We are reminded in another hymn of Jesus "crucified outside the city wall".

Most of us for most of our lives will not be at the centre of things and when we are brought to the centre we may not realise this or have time to notice because we are just getting on giving everything and trying to do the best we can... When we are not at the centre of things, we also have a special role. Being on the side of things can also make a difference. Jesus dying on the Cross confirms that God communicates with humanity mainly from the side of things. For Moses the seeming impossibility of receiving a commission to lead the people that comes from a burning bush, for a young couple in Nazareth the incredulity that their baby son will be the Saviour and for 2 people on the road to Emmaus finding that it is a stranger travelling with them who will help them make sense of Jesus dying and rising, and then in the breaking of the bread be revealed to them as the Saviour.

As we continue to adjust to new ways of living, we are grateful for the courageous service of so many people working now at the centre of things and we recognise that for some this has meant the sacrifice of their lives. We also notice that from the side of things God's way of selfless love is found inspiring people to serve others and save lives and lived out by all whose lives have hope that all things can be made new.