

St Peter's, Brighton Beach

'The Lost Sheep & The Good Shepherd'

Fr Chester Lord – 10/09/2023

I can still remember when I was little my mother reading nursery rhymes to me. One of them that stuck in my mind was 'Little Bo BEEP'. I am sure you remember it too. It goes:

*Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep,
And can't tell where to find them;
Leave them alone and they will come home,
Bringing their tails behind them.*

But I wonder if they would come home on their own?

I am sure that most of us have owned a pet at some stage in our lives. There are many animals that make good pets and companions. The most popular are cats and dogs, but birds and fish are also cool. Some people prefer hamsters and Guinea pigs. If you happen to live in the country and have a lot of room, you might even own a large animal such as a horse.

However, if you choose to have a pet, it is a big responsibility. You must be willing to take care of it. You have to feed it and make sure that it has plenty of water. You need to keep it clean and take it to the veterinarian when it is sick. You have to make sure that your pet is kept in a safe place and, if it wanders and gets lost, you must go and look for it and rescue it and bring it safely home.

We all know that a shepherd loves, cares, protects, guides, feeds and if required, rescues his sheep. Sheep can't take care of themselves. They need someone to keep them from harm and watch over them. We discovered that the sheep know the shepherd's voice and follow

him out of trust. He knows them and they know him. A true shepherd is even willing to lay down his life for just one lost sheep that goes astray.

This of course reminds us of the parable of the Good Shepherd. This shepherd owned one hundred sheep. Every evening he would count them to make sure that all had come back from the pasture.

On the evening in our story, he was counting his sheep and was alarmed to see that one was missing. The shepherd quickly closed the gate of the sheep pen and hurried to find his lost sheep. He looked everywhere – in the forest, on top of the hills and even behind rocks. Until at last he found the little lost sheep. The shepherd was overjoyed. He put the frightened and weak sheep over his shoulders and carried it all the way back to the safety of the sheep pen.

Jesus told his disciples this story to let them, and us know, that he is our good shepherd, and we are his sheep. He knows each of us by name and we too can recognise his voice in our hearts. His voice is one of gentleness, peace, calm, forgiveness, mercy and above all love. Jesus the shepherd doesn't want one of us to be lost either. Not just physically lost, but also the feeling of being lost. So, whenever we are sad, lonely, afraid, confused or anxious, Jesus offers to console, guide, defend and nourish us spiritually. He promises to be available in prayer, because he loves each of us very much.

Jesus says: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." It's not only about us recognising and knowing Jesus, it is also about him knowing us. The sheep (us) don't have to intellectually or deeply theologically comprehend Jesus to qualify. They just have to listen and hear with their hearts, their souls if you wish.

I believe that in hearing the voice of Jesus we are listening to the voice of love and peace. To one of the deepest, most authentic and inspiring voice one can hear.

We don't have to earn our right to hear and follow that voice. It is a gift available to all given by grace.

St Benedict says that we should endeavour to "listen with the ears of our heart." It's a mixed metaphor but it makes sense in this context. That which we take in through the ears need to be translated by our hearts. Our hearts being a way of asking: where are we grounded? How do we perceive the world? What gives us ultimate meaning in our lives? It's a little bit like the chicken and the egg conundrum- does our hearing shape our reality, or does our reality shape our hearing?

For instance, a heart grounded in fear is going to shape both our hearing and living. By extension, a heart grounded in suspicion and paranoia is going to make you sceptical of what you hear and will also shape your world view.

So, what does Jesus say? Regardless of our context, Jesus becomes a compelling voice. For Christians, no other voice takes precedence.

Do we hear the voice of love? Are we called to follow that voice into the world? Even if we are to walk through the valley of the shadow of death that voice of love in our hearts will see us through.

Do we hear the voice of generosity? That we have been given a wonderful gift of life and truth through Christ's ultimate sacrifice. Are we in turn obeying that voice and being generous to others: not just with our money but with our time, talents and own gifts to share.

Do we hear the voice of justice and compassion? That is to “treat others as you would have them treat you?” Following the voice of justice in pursuing social fairness, equality, opportunities and prudence. Compassion in attending to the needs of others and meeting them where they are at.

Do you hear the voice of creation, life and hope? Life offered in abundance in all its fullness with the hope and promise that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. A flourishing reality. If your heart gravitates towards that voice then how can fear and suspicion shape your world?

By extension, what is the ‘*voice*’ our neighbours and fellow pilgrims on life’s journey are hearing from us?! Are they hearing and sensing a message of hope, optimism, kindness, resilience and gentleness. It’s expressed by what we say, but many would argue, even more by how we live, interact and conduct ourselves and with one another.

We also understand that unkind words, hurtful actions and ignoring someone who needs our help and compassion is not a good way to treat our neighbours. So, Jesus in turn asks us to be good shepherds unto one another. We need to be vigilant and watch out for those feeling lost, lonely or scared amongst us every single day. There are countless ways to show each other that we care and to be kind to one another. It’s in the big things but also the small acts of kindness that we offer one another. That is the great commandment, to love one another as Jesus loves us. Or the universal Golden Rule which states that we treat other as we ourselves would like to be treated.

So, the challenge for us all this morning is twofold: to view Jesus as our great shepherd in our times of need, but also to step up and be good shepherds to our neighbours, loved ones or anyone that might need that little bit of a hand up. Amen.

