

## Good Shepherd Sunday - Easter IV 2019 – Year C

The obituary appeared in the newspaper this week of ‘Lord Toby Jug,’ a companion of ‘Screaming Lord Such’ - both people who have enlivened our General Elections in recent decades as members of the Monster Raving Loony Party. In the current political climate, I suspect that they would have achieved far higher polls than ever before had they been standing now! Lord Toby (who once dropped a pile of his election posters in a river to appeal to ‘floating voters’) suggested various policies in his various election campaigns: adding super-glue to lip balm in order to cure obesity, introducing text lanes on pavements to stop mobile phone users walking into lamp posts, and requiring young people to read a book for every ten ‘selfies’ they take. He may be on to something in the latter!

The reason I tell you this is that, in a sense, Lord Toby offered people the opportunity to look at life in a different way. This is exactly what our faith calls us to do, although there any comparison ends, because the bon-mots of such characters (whilst feeding us with some harmless humour) lead nowhere – they are fun even in the face of the Brexit debacle.

In contrast, we have heard three vivid readings today which cause us to think about our Christian journey, from the Spirit-filled account of Tabitha’s raising in Acts to the transcendent worship portrayed in Revelation. In some ways, the Gospel reading from John seems a bit of a poor relation to both in these Fifty Great Days of Eastertide, yet I think that this short passage offers far more than we might think at first reading.

I don’t know about you, but the phrase that strikes me in this passage is: *‘It was winter’* - three words which conjure up a sense of chill. John is a great painter of pictures for us throughout the whole Gospel, with his vivid accounts. One of the other important things John does is to ‘hang’ his account of the Lord’s life on the great Jewish Festivals, starting and ending with Passover. John wants us to appreciate their importance to the everyday life of Jesus as well as providing a framework for his writing. We will come back to Passover later.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is celebrating the Festival of Dedication - at the time, a comparatively new feast less than 200 years old. We know it as Hanukkah- a joyous commemoration (usually falling in December) marking the rededication of the Temple to God by the faithful people of Israel after the sacrilegious acts carried out by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. He, the Seleucid King, had caused an image of the god Zeus to be erected in the Temple and pigs sacrificed on the altar. Following the revolt by the Maccabees, the Temple was cleansed, and worship resumed. So, a joyous festival, and yet John creates a sense of chill in this passage. We can imagine the wind whistling around the Portico of Solomon and Jesus inside the Temple compound sheltered somewhat from the cold east winds which I believe Jerusalem can experience at that time of year.

It is here that we have a challenge from the religious authorities to attempt to force Jesus to reveal just who he is. One of the things John is also doing is challenging us to consider **our** Faith. Will it be frozen in stone like those confronting Jesus? They are celebrating a

feast yet can't see that it is they who are being charged to think about the way they look at life in Faith terms. John has revealed Jesus as the one who brings the breaking of the wonder of God's Love into everyday life; the changing of water into wine, the drawing into the knowledge of God's love those beyond the pale: the Samaritan woman at the well, the paralyzed man at the pool of Siloam, the woman caught in the act of adultery: the damaged, the weary. The fullness of life is being offered to all by the Good Shepherd.

The authorities insist on the outward show of religion yet convey the sense that there is no inner conversion - no feeling that they are open to hearing anything other than what they want to hear. This ultimately leads to a monologue of 'self.' You don't hear other voices, merely your own, and you certainly don't open yourself up to the inner pull of God's Love within your life. Religion, or whatever other philosophy you see yourself as guided by, merely becomes the outward husk covering self-centered concern to the exclusion of all else. It's as real today as it was then.

If this becomes the case within religion then, as the American Episcopal priest Michael Marshall comments: *'religious doctrine becomes a means of exclusion rather than a path to God. Scripture becomes a weapon rather than the revelation of God's life with God's people. Neighbours become enemies to be feared and destroyed instead of enemies becoming neighbours through love. Life becomes ritual instead of sacramental.'*

This is the antithesis of our Faith and is where the image of the Good Shepherd offers us such a powerful reminder of the overflowing grace of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. This is a Shepherd who offers reckless love to the point of death and beyond for those who hear his voice; the knowledge that whatever our situation, whatever we are experiencing, we are never alone on our journey.

Our call is to be open to the call of the Shepherd, to allow ourselves to heed the pull of God's love within our lives - giving space to the Shepherd's voice in our liturgies, our prayers, our silences, and our interactions with the world. This in turn leads us on a journey. Jesus challenges us to approach every day as an opportunity to draw others to the fullness of life he offers in his resurrection life; lifting up the lowly, challenging the rich and powerful, seeking the lost, and even turning the other cheek; but above all to do so with the same reckless love he shows for us. He calls us as Shepherd to remember the words from Isaiah he himself interpreted in his home synagogue and which find their fulfilment not just in him but also in those who seek to follow him:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free.'*

Never has our society need the Christian message and vision as it does now. The helplessness so many feel within their lives, the abandonment of many areas responsibility on so many fronts by so many bodies and institutions; the huge number of men, women and children in need of the work of the Spirit within their lives: those caught in all sorts of addiction, people dealing with mental illness or the breakdown of relationships. You will be able to list many more situations yourselves.

Forget hierarchies in Church or State; **you and I** - members of the Body of Christ – we each have a shared vocation and responsibility to draw people to the greatest message of hope for humanity. The onus falls on each of us in enabling others to hear and respond to the voice of the Good Shepherd within their lives.

Today's Gospel reading is the final Festival John talks of before the culmination of his Gospel: the second Passover - Easter - the second Passover which transcends the first, because we are drawn to understand that the ultimate self-giving love of Jesus leads us to Passover Freedom - **true** freedom open to all. Standing in the light of the Pascal candle – the Pillar of Fire, we can proclaim the freedom found in Jesus Christ, there are no 'ifs' or 'buts.' No one is excluded. All life become Sacrament if we heed the shepherd's voice within our lives.



### **Acts 9: 36-end**

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, 'Please come to us without delay.' So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, 'Tabitha, get up.' Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

### **Revelation 7: 9-end**

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing,

'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom

and thanksgiving and honour

and power and might

be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

For this reason they are before the throne of God,

and worship him day and night within his temple,

and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;

the sun will not strike them,

nor any scorching heat;

for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd,

and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,

and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

### **John 10: 22-30**

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.'