

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Sermon – 4th Sunday of Easter

8th May 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is known as Good Shepherd Sunday, when each year the readings set are based around the theme of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

Our Gospel reading today, coming a few verses after Jesus has spoken the words 'I am the good shepherd', is part of a section that begins with Jesus healing a blind man on the Sabbath. This triggered an argument among the religious authorities over whether Jesus was 'from God' or whether he was possessed by a demon. Some of the Pharisees thought he could not possibly be from God because he had broken the Sabbath. Others thought that the miracle itself showed that Jesus was 'from God'.

Jesus enters into discussion with them and uses an extended figure of speech about shepherds and sheep. He refers to himself both as the good shepherd and as the gate of the sheepfold, pointing out that those who enter a sheepfold by climbing in another way are thieves and bandits. The Gospel notes that, again, the Pharisees 'were divided' because of these words – some of them no doubt spotted who the thieves and bandits were.

All this is going on during the festival of the Dedication, also known as Hanukkah. The festival commemorates the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem, in the second century before Christ, after it had been desecrated by the Greeks, who had set up a pagan altar inside it and made a sacrifice to Zeus upon it. This sparked off a successful rebellion by the Maccabees, which freed Jerusalem from Greek rule and enabled the temple and its altar to be rededicated. And so, within the context of the festival celebrating the rededication, the question by the religious authorities to Jesus has strong political overtones. They ask him to tell them 'plainly' if he is the Messiah, the Christ. Is he the one who will liberate the Jewish nation, two hundred years after the Maccabees, but this time from Roman imperial rule?

But Jesus seems to ignore the political overtones of their question, drawing their attention instead to the works he has performed - the signs he has shown them in which power was subordinate to love – as all the evidence they need. This is what he effectively replies to their question: 'Look at my life. Look at my actions. What I do tells you who I am.' But they cannot hear the evidence, for they are not of his 'sheep'. To them he is a stranger. His own sheep, on the other hand, hear his voice, that of their good shepherd.

Why all this talk of sheep and shepherds? Not just because first century Palestine was an agrarian economy. There are also echoes there of the shepherd boy who became a king, the greatest king Israel had ever known – King David. But Jesus goes further. He refers to having passed on to his followers all that the Father has given him, and that 'the Father and I are one' - working together in complete harmony. For his followers, it means he can also say this: 'I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.' That is the Easter message.

This is too much for the authorities. They hear in the words ‘the Father and I are one’ that Jesus is making himself God, not just in the sense of being united in purpose and agency with the Father. And so they try to stone him for blasphemy. To which Jesus replies by saying to them again: if you don’t believe what I say, believe the works that I do. ‘Look at my life. Look at my actions. What I do tells you who I am.’

Today is also Vocations Sunday, when the church invites people to pray for more vocations to ordination and encourages those who may be considering it to explore a call to ministry. But there’s a much wider meaning to vocation than the call to ministry, for every single person has a vocation. It’s why we talk of ‘vocational guidance’ in schools. For many, their vocation – literally, their calling - is what they do from day to day: being a spouse, a partner, a parent, a person doing a particular job. Sometimes the calling we have is something we have not yet found time to follow. Sometimes there are moments of revelation that change us, when we become aware of our true calling, the thing we are really here to do.

And so it’s appropriate that our first reading today is the story of Dorcas. Dorcas is remembered, not for her mighty acts of power, but for the clothes she made. When people wear them, they think of her. On the face of it a simple, practical vocation, but one for which she is deeply loved. When Peter arrives, her friends show him the clothes as they weep for her loss.

Dorcas will also be remembered as part of the resurrection story. For the last few weeks we have focused on the appearances of Jesus to his friends after his rising. Now it is Peter who shows the healing power of God at work. Peter, commissioned by Jesus at the breakfast on the beach (‘Feed my sheep’),

honouring the calling of those he encounters as the gospel spreads out from Jerusalem across the known world.

The story of Dorcas is a reminder that life is about call and response, for each one of us. The response of Mary to the call she heard ('Be it unto me'). The response of Jesus to the call he discerned, echoing words of Isaiah as he read from the scroll in the synagogue at Nazareth: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.'

The questions Vocations Sunday asks of all of us are:

Is what I am spending my energies on every day my real vocation?

Is this what God wants me to be doing with my life?

How is what I am doing giving witness to my faith?

What contribution am I offering to making the world a better place for others?

To what extent am I a spreader of love, of truth, of justice, of freedom, of tolerance and acceptance?

And even if I am in a position which it would be difficult to change at the moment, how, within it, is God calling me to greater service?

How much do I give in my life and how much do I take?

Call and response. In the same chapter of John, Chapter 10, Jesus speaks the words which sum up the reason why churches exist, why people have turned their lives upside down for this Gospel and, please God, will continue to do so for centuries to come. For he said: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' Life in all its fullness, whatever our many callings, each one of them

unique. I wonder what yours will be. On this Vocations Sunday, let us keep in mind Jesus's response to those who asked him who he was: 'Look at my life. Look at my actions. What I do tells you who I am.'

Amen.