

Easter 4, Year C

Acts 9: 36-43
Psalm 23
John 10: 22-30

Jesus said: My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life.

You may know about sheep. I know more about dogs. I expect their behaviour has much in common. Our dog is called Og. Og is an Old Testament bad guy, the King of Bashan, the sort of chap that you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley late on a Saturday night as the pubs are closing. Or so the Israelites thought. I thought Og was a wonderful name for a dog. Og the dog. Not that Og the dog is in any way like Og the king. You wouldn't mind meeting Og the dog in a dark alley. He is a rescue dog, and was apparently abused. He is a timid creature, fearful of anyone in a hoodie, of anyone holding a pole or stick, and of traffic. 'Now, this is all very interesting', I hear you say, 'but what has Og the dog to do with sheep and shepherds?' Well, boys and girls, it concerns animal behaviour. Og the dog, like Dolly the sheep, will not be hurried. If you try to hurry him he lies down and will not move. If you carry him to where you want him to be, as soon as you put him down, he runs back to where he was before. After all, dog is god in reverse. If you keep quietly walking, cajoling, leading and showing, he will eventually follow. Cajoling, leading, showing, encouraging: these are tips on how to be a good shepherd. Jesus as the good shepherd is modelling one type of leadership.

This calls for persistence, a sort-of pretended nonchalance in the shepherd. The shepherd needs to have faith in the sheep—faith that they will indeed follow eventually. The shepherd must have patience. I am profoundly gifted in this regard—with *impatience*. When I hear of, and reflect upon, the need for a shepherd to be full of patience and compassionate persistence, I am brought up sharp with yet another realization of my own inadequacies.

But the story is not only about the shepherd's voice and manner. It's not just for clergy in their role as shepherd. It's also about sheep—you and me—and the need for us to *listen* to the shepherd's voice. Listening is not just about hearing words. It means attending—giving your attention—to the speaker. Watching the face, the emotions. Observing the body language. Being alert to nuances in the tone of voice. Picking up, you might say the vibrations in the environment. This is hard work.

Hearing is about picking up vibrations from the environment. That's what our eardrums and ossicles and cochleas are for, and the hearing parts of the brain. Eardrums and ossicles evolve from the things that in fish do exactly the same thing: they pick up vibrations from the environment. If you watch a shoal of fish, you will see that they all change direction together. How do they do this? They are picking up vibrations from the watery environment so they know when to turn. How do we pick up what you might call 'spiritual vibrations' from the environment so that we know when to change direction? Turning, re-turning, re-pentance, transformation, pupation, metamorphosis. It's not about changing the environment, about moving to a new place or a new job. It's about us 'hearing' what that still small voice that whispers in our ear is telling us. The trouble is, there is so much *noise* that assails us: noise from outside, noise from advertising that tempts us to greed and envy, noise from inside that tempts us to pride. Noise of the ego.

In Acts 9, some of which we hear today, we learn of people transformed. Paul eventually hears the divine voice, after having spent so much of his life persecuting it. He is brought, as it were, from death to life. We learn that Aeneas, sick of the palsy, hears the divine voice, and is healed. He is brought, as it were, from death to life. Tabitha/Dorcas is brought from death to life. Last week we heard that Peter, who denied Jesus three times, was nevertheless affirmed by Jesus who asked him to 'feed my sheep'. He is brought, as it were, from the death of denials to new life.

These episodes are about liberation. Never mind if the man was *actually* paralyzed in the way in which someone who has had a stroke is paralyzed. Instead, think of the way in which spiritual sickness can weigh us down and paralyze us, how we can be paralyzed by guilt, how we can be kept captive by regret, looking backwards, never daring to move on. Never mind whether Tabitha was biologically dead or not. After all, people in coma can appear to be dead. People who breathe unaided can be brain dead (it's too tempting - I can't resist it - to point out how many people appear to fall into that category). We talk of a living death: think of team building exercises, or synods.

The message is renewal, transformation from spiritual death to fullness of life. Moving from being constrained to the wide space of salvation. It results from being attentive to the divine voice, the still small voice within. As I say, it's hard work. C S Lewis wrote: *God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains*. It was when Tabitha and Aeneas and Peter and Paul were in pain that they heard the voice. It is so often when we are in pain or distress or perplexity—and not until we are—that we begin to see the need for us to change, to turn.

How can we become more attentive to that still small voice? The goal is transformation from spiritual death to fullness of life, from imprisonment in ego to the wide space of salvation.

Lord, open our ears so that we can hear, and open our hearts so that we may be transformed. Amen.