



Feed my Lambs (2)

Final sermon as Vice Dean and Canon Pastor of Chelmsford Cathedral,

Sunday 21st April 2024, 9.30am and 11.15am

John 10 vv11-18

Jesus Christ was born with the agony and the desperation and the anger and the bereavements of countless generations on his heart. Despite his complete and utter humanity, he was still the second person of the Trinity, God Incarnate, and surely, he would have had a consciousness deep in his soul even as a young boy that countless millions before him had suffered and died, estranged from those they loved, embittered by the treachery and hatred of others with a painful powerlessness to change or influence destructive events. And above all, perhaps, people who had lost their faith and railed against God because of his apparent absence and disinterest. 'Why no!' reflects the priest and poet R S Thomas,

'I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find.'

The death of Absalom, King David's son still haunts me. A father's grief at the loss of the boy he loved who was flesh of his flesh meant that, at the end of the day, even though the civil war which Absalom had instigated against his father which had threatened to tear apart the very kingdom which God had promised and foretold paled into insignificance when faced with the death of a child, *still* beloved and *still* treasured beyond words or reason. 'Oh Absalom, Absalom my son, my son Absalom, would that I had died instead of thee'. It is the cry of grief of generations given an acute focus through the laments of the prophets and leaders who are given a commission to love and save God's people but whose constant experience is one of a sense of abandonment and

failure. It forced Elijah to curl up in a foetal position under a broom tree and in the darkness of a cave, left only to reflect that 'It is enough now, O Lord, take away my life'. It left Jeremiah, burdened by his message of judgement to the people he loved and accursed by those same people to whom he is called to deliver it, to cry out 'Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable? Truly you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail'. And sometimes it leaves mere human beings so aghast at the apparent carelessness and indifference of God, that as weak and as mortal as they are, they are prepared to challenge the behaviour of their creator: 'O Lord why does your wrath burn hot against your people?' implores Moses "Why should the Egyptians say it was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from your fierce wrath and change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people'.

No wonder then, that when Jesus stops a funeral procession of an only son mourned by his mother as they process from a village called Nain, Jesus when he halts the bier says to his mother 'Do not weep'. They are three of the most important words in the Bible, matched only by the description of Jesus' own grief when he tasted for himself up close and personal the sting of human loss at the death of his friend Lazarus. John tells us 'Jesus wept', a grief reaction so stark and revealing that bystanders were led to comment 'See how he loved him!'. At this moment, faced with the all-consuming, unfathomable pain of another parent, beside herself with grief at the loss of yet another beloved and treasured child, the words 'Do not weep' also stretch across the generations and speak to and for others of the grief and shock of a God who finally confronts in person the fragile and vulnerable state of that which he has created. No wonder then, that in a book called 'Freedom, Suffering and Love' Andrew Elphinstone could say this: 'Perhaps God in his love stands, not only as the bestower of forgiveness, but as the Father who, for the sake of the created whose glory is his desire, even stoops to invite the forgiveness he cannot deserve in order to make it one degree easier for man to be drawn into the orbit of love'.

I realise that for some this might be a difficult, even a controversial stance to take; but if there is any credence to it, then my goodness it might shine spectacular new light on what Jesus said when he described himself as 'The Good Shepherd'. Because no longer would this be a mere statement of God's function and purpose- a description of how and why all those called into communion with Him might feel safe in their newfound identity as sheep within the sheepfold. It *now* becomes too, an emotional and heartfelt pleading to all his damaged creation that they

are loved beyond all description, and that Jesus recognises just what it is and how much there is that his death on the cross has to restore and put right. And if you look at the many stories and encounters between people and Jesus in the Gospels you can pick up that his relationship to them is more than just a shepherd looking after his sheep; this is now a shocked and grieved father calling out for his sons and daughters, in an echo of an ancestor who shouted at the heavens 'Oh Absalom my son, my son Absalom'. A parent facing the possibility of eternal estrangement with those he treasured, wanting desperately to scoop up, and to reassure, and to love and save his beloved children. Suddenly you see, 'The Good Shepherd' takes on new, symbolic meaning.

And if you look carefully at the Gospels, I think you can clearly see this grieving heart of God, whose love and sympathy and grief and anger at what has befallen his little lambs outpours and overflows in a torrent of compassion, stooping to invite the forgiveness he cannot deserve, which could only ever be healed by the sacrifice of the cross. The stories we have of Jesus Christ are peppered with encounters with children and young people- has that ever struck you? Where little lambs are precisely that- defenceless, vulnerable, exposed, tiny beings totally reliant upon others for their welfare and preservation. Their health and restoration are begged for by, for example, a desperate Gentile Syrophenician woman who is prepared to argue with and to challenge the author of life who challenges her right, by all the laws which are human as a Samaritan to ask help from a Jew. By a desperate father, quite literally beside himself with grief and fear because his severely possessed son is powerless, presumably in an epileptic frenzy, to stop himself being thrown into the water and into the fire, and whose condition is so terrible that in Mark's version of the story, and interestingly only in Mark's version, the author of life is so aghast that something has gone so badly wrong with one of his creation, he who knew intimately the lives and stories of all those with whom he came into contact- well of course he did- nevertheless still has to ask the boy's father 'How long has he been like this?' It's almost as if Jesus at that moment is so horror struck that he is lost for words. But notice too that in his version of the same story, it is only Luke who, in an echo of the funeral procession of a widow's only son at Nain tells us that the father as he pleads with Jesus refers to his son as 'My only child'. So here is *another* parent then, who rails at Jesus and who shouts at he who formed Adam from the dust of the ground, 'Lord I believe! Help my unbelief!'

But please be assured, the approach I am taking with this sermon as well as, I hope, thoroughly enriching and perhaps even challenging this

familiar concept of The Good Shepherd, also I believe gives us two precious things which should encourage and comfort us in our faith. So important is the effect of suffering children and parents on Jesus which as I have suggested colours deeply and defines why he described himself as The Good Shepherd; that his love and his grief and his desire to change the status quo for them spills over into his wider ministry with women and men who also come before him with their curtailed and damaged lives. And it's remarkable, and significant, how many of them he addresses as his daughters and sons. 'Daughter your faith has healed you; go in peace' he says to the woman with haemorrhages who after her twelve-year failing battle with her ailment finally touches the fringe of Jesus' cloak. 'Son your sins are forgiven you' he says to the paralytic who had been lowered from the roof in front of him. To the Pharisees, furious that on the Sabbath he had healed a woman who Luke tells us was crippled and bent over and quite unable to stand up straight and had been that way for eighteen years, Jesus calls a 'Daughter of Abraham' who was long overdue from being released from her pain. And in this context, it is so significant not only that he reminds the Pharisees that she is one of their own race and culture but that she is a direct ancestor of Jesus' *own* family tree. Here you see, is a nod to those countless millions before him 'who had suffered and died, estranged from those they loved, embittered by the treachery and hatred of others, with a painful powerlessness to change or influence destructive events'.

And the message to us is a powerful one; that despite all, and who, and what we are, despite our awkwardness, our dogmatism, our mean spiritedness, our ugliness and all the facades and defences and barricades we erect, we are nevertheless *all*, all of us God's little lambs, and infinitely precious in his sight, and it is for *all* of us that his crucifixion and resurrection continues to be played out, stooping to invite the forgiveness he cannot deserve in order to make it one degree easier for all of us to be drawn into the orbit of love. When Jesus takes the hand of Jairus' daughter she is a little girl who is all of us, because the Saviour's own resurrection from the sleep of death back into the land of the living, takes us all by the hand and raises us up.

And with all this in mind we need to look again at Jesus' post-resurrection command to the forgiven and restored Peter to 'Feed my Lambs'. Yes of course, it is a call to be Christ's primary disciple and a reiteration and re-establishment of Christ's earlier commission of Peter as the rock upon which Christ would build his church. But surely what we have here, now, is much more than Peter's call to be the first prince of

the church. It is a realisation as to *why* Peter must love at all- because the infant church which he is called to lead and serve must step ashore from the boat as Christ did, and must have its heart moved and torn as was Christ's when, as Mark tells us, Jesus' love and compassion spills over like a bursting dam upon the crowd awaiting him because he saw that they were 'Harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd'.

And why is this important? Because it tells us that as well as us all being the little lambs of God, as members of Christ's church we all share that same great commission which was Peter's. The call to 'Feed my Lambs' is to learn to see as God sees, to feel as God feels, to have for ourselves a little of that moved and torn divine heart, to be able to see with the love, the sympathy, the grief and the anger at what has befallen God's little lambs, and to scoop up and treasure people's sheer defencelessness, their dependency, their vulnerability and, if we can see through their barricades which Jesus could do, their sheer 'lovableness'. This is the necessary equipment for any who would be called to Sainthood, and that is a call which you and I share. And I give thanks to God that for the last fourteen years I have had that privilege; to grow with you, to learn with you and from you and to travel alongside you, as together with Christ as our companion we have walked a little further along that road, with our hearts burning within us.

Life is not hurrying
On to a receding future, nor hankering after
An imagined past. It is the turning
Aside like Moses to the miracle
Of the lit bush, to a brightness
That seemed as transitory as your youth
Once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

Rev'd Canon Ivor Moody