

SUMMARY: THE GOOD SHEPHERD

(Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; John 10:11-18)

A joke: This fellow arrives in heaven and is being given an orientation tour by St Peter. It's so beautiful but then he notices an enclosure with seriously high walls, surrounded by all sorts of signage calling for silence – for folks to remain as quiet as possible as they pass by. **'WHY'** he whispers? *Who are behind that wall and why do we have to be silent? 'Shhh!'* answers St Peter *'they the folks who need to believe that they are the only ones here'*.

One of the things we find so difficult to own about our faith in Christ, is his radical inclusivity! I have no idea why we find that so challenging, why we would find it somehow comforting to think of some of us as being 'in' while others are 'out' - you know". We may argue **'What about Matthew 25 and the separation of the 'sheep and the goats'** - forgetting that the point of that parable isn't so much about judgement and separation as about **'whatever you have done to the least of these you've done to me'**.

Jesus wasn't teaching separation and judgement here nearly so much as pointing us toward caring for the most marginalized and vulnerable – everywhere. It's as we care for them, he's saying, that we are caring for Him! It's the radical, radically inclusive love and embrace of the risen Christ's presence which is everywhere, and in everyone, and in everything!!!

Man, those disciples were on fire! They had actually been given to experience the risen Christ-presence for themselves. As they were entering the temple, we're told they were engaged by a pretty well-known crippled beggar who charity from them. But Peter and John instead, calling on the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, just astounded everyone there by totally healing him. Remember that catchy children's song: **'Silver and gold have I none, said he. But such as I have give I unto thee. In the name of Jesus Christ, of Nazareth rise up and walk'**.

A crowd **'filled with wonder and amazement'** quickly gathered and that's where Peter and John began to preach: **'Your leaders acted in ignorance by killing Jesus, but God has used it all for good ...and now, by your and the word he uses *metanoia*: meaning *repenting, changing, recognizing and following the way of Jesus Christ - you too could share in his wonderful resurrection and have life'*.**

Deeply challenged by this, the temple authorities stopped them, arrested them, and brought before their religious Council. Peter answered their questions by insisting on not them and their religiosity but on Jesus Christ as the only Way by which everything is saved, made whole. That's how everything is brought back into God's SHALOM!

How dare we be tempted to try reducing Christ's infinite inclusivity to justify our so-often small, parochial theologies! Christ isn't just risen for me and for you, and for people like us, but for all of creation! Whatever wonders Jesus Christ is and represents is intended to be embraced by so much more than just us within Christendom traditions – He truly is infinitely for all and for everything, everywhere.

If our understanding of the risen Jesus Christ results in anything less than that, then JB Phillips was absolutely spot-on, writing some 70 years ago, that our vision of *God is just too small*.

We know the pastoral image of sheep and shepherds from scripture, but I think sometimes our familiarity with it allows us to miss the all-encompassing enormity that is being expressed. Our other readings today are from Psalm 23 and John 10. It's the Good Shepherd who chooses deliberately, intentionally to lay down his life for us, all of us, his sheep. And it's the Good Shepherd who ultimately guides us - all of us- to the fullest possible restoration of our truest, best selves, ourselves made whole, as we've been made to be – our soul selves...

Truly: ***'He restores my soul'***

I began today by saying how we find it so difficult actually to own Christ's radical inclusivity, and that I have no idea why we find it so comforting to think of some of us as being 'in' while others are 'out'. I'm struck in today's texts by how there is absolutely nothing to suggest any sense of that exclusivity. In vs 16 of John 10 he even spells it out for us - putting words in Jesus' mouth, saying that he has *'other sheep that do not belong to this fold. And that I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. His heart-desire is that we all be one flock, with one shepherd'*.

But do you think this is ever going to be possible: all creation actually coming into a realization of this one awesome truth of God's holiness as restored in Christ - everywhere? **And if it is to come, who on earth do you believe has been commissioned and empowered to make it happen?** Isn't that just about exactly why we as the Church exist – to be working towards living into that reality? It's what we pray for: that, *'God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven'*.

I love Evelyn Underhill's image of Jesus as shepherd, all creation as his sheep, and we, the church, as the sheepdogs he uses to do his work. ***"We want to be one among the sheepdogs employed by the Good Shepherd. Now have you ever watched a good sheepdog at his work? It is not at all an emotional animal. It just goes on with the job quite steadily, takes no notice of bad weather, rough ground, or its own comfort. It seldom or never comes back to be stroked. Yet its faithfulness, its intimate understanding with the master, is one of the loveliest things in the world. Now and then it just looks at the shepherd. And when the time comes for rest they can generally be found together."***ⁱⁱ

Like that beggar outside the temple all most of us may ever be aware of wanting from God is the silver and gold of what we know – when what we are being offered to receive in Christ - and to share in his name - is so much more: life in all of its full abundance!

We have to acknowledge that our increasingly unveiled exposure to the truth of the risen Christ everywhere with all of the living largesse that he represents is always going to be a challenge as it is in contrast to the tight-fisted closeness of our own, small, self-preserving agendas and biases. Jesus Christ and the way of following Him is always, ultimately, going to be more than we can know. It's always going to be better. Deeper. Infinitely more generous. Kinder. Infinitely more compassionate. Just.

And so of course there must be at least some sense of personal indictment here as we realize how easily we do make our God too small, all the time. Mea Culpa. But thank God that's not all there is because there is also, always. While following the way of our Good Shepherd may expose the inadequacy of own egoic paths, it doesn't leave us there – because it is also, constantly, drawing us out – inviting us to live into a life of so much more abundance. **We are whole. We are forgiven. We are beloved.** We don't have to live the angry, bitter, hurting, defensive, guilt which is so often our default setting...

And we can recognize how this is truly for everyone. That means we don't have ever to see other people who are different from us as being competition: as somehow being better or worse simply because they are younger, older, richer, poorer, perhaps more left wing, more right wing, lighter-skinned, darker-skinned, more faithful, more secular, gay, straight or anything else – EVER! We are all exposed as having been made one in the risen Christ and as his followers he would have us know that and live lives that reflect that! In Jesus Christ we are invited to know and to love how all and everything is equally loved and touched by Christ's risen presence... And so it's simply for us to love all as well - loving the Christ within all however difficult it may at times be to see Him, but loving them anyway - that they too may come to know and own their most Christ-sealed identity...

Our prayer is that you may lead us to these, your truths, O Thou Good Shepherd...

Why wouldn't we want that?

What stops us from properly embracing that?

Truly, as God in Christ is our Good Shepherd, none of us are wanting for anything, however needy we may feel we are...

Because we already have everything we need for our souls to be restored and alive, and empowered to be the blessing God intends

May it be so

Amen

Rev Robin Jacobson

ⁱ Paraphrasing Acts 3:17ff

ⁱⁱ From quotation in 'The Minister's Prayer Book' Edited by John W. Doberstein, Collins: 1986