

How do we make sense of our world and God? I find this an incredibly challenging question because it relates so much to our personal narrative and experience. As I was reminded by a colleague on Friday, when we are comfortable, we rarely cry out to God to help us; but for those who live with physical or mental pain; or social isolation everyday – their cry to God becomes a very immediate prayer. This question of meaning is so important, and it relates directly to how we hear the readings today.

The passage from John 10 provides an image of a ‘good shepherd’ who is prepared to lay down their life, and then be lifted up again. It is the image of one who knows and understands the needs of those in their care; who hears their cries, who anticipates the dangers they might face. As well as one who helps them make sense of the world in which they find themselves.

Today as we continue our Easter journey. Our resurrection story is John recounting the teaching of Jesus to the early church, trying to help them make sense of the resurrection and Jesus’ teaching all in one statement. This was a community longing for the imminent saving grace of God, and yet like much of John’s writing it asks more questions than it answers.

In this description of a ‘good shepherd’; John expresses the willingness and wonder in which Jesus enters the crucifixion and the resurrection. John is wanting his audience to understand that Jesus is not questioning the journey that laid ahead; rather he is embracing the wonder of it.

John also writes in a way that confirms that Jesus is offering a new type of leadership. Firstly, Jesus knows those who follow – not just their names – but knows his followers like we know a close member of our own family – the knowledge that comes from the day by day living in the same space with someone. The other key feature is that a shepherd leader is aware of the landscape – the dangers that might be faced, the resources that will be needed for survival – in other words as the psalmist put in many hundreds of years before – when the lord is my shepherd – I shall not want!

Though today’s passage is situated during Jesus’ ministry, the gospel of John addresses the needs of specific communities in the post

resurrection era. Scholars believe that the gospel was written around 90 CE, a time when the Johannine community was facing harassment¹. It was also a time when they were seeking new models of leadership having experienced the leadership of those who had abandoned them during the seize of Jerusalem in AD70. John is giving this new community clarity about the type of leader that Jesus is, and also the type of followers he is seeking. Jesus knows those who seek him and follow – but also Jesus will not abandon them. And at the heart of the John's gospel is the message that *Jesus was not only a living, spiritual presence who was worshipped as God in the liturgical assembly of the community, but he was also the model for church leadership and a model of the abundance of God.*

John reminds us not to make our faith about knowledge – but it is rather about how we live with each other – how we make sense of and care for our world. Being part of a community, a body which is aware of the needs of each other – not just when we need to cry out – but when others are hurting too. A community which holds its leaders to account and invites them to reflect the leadership which John reveals to the early church.

Today we have our annual congregational meeting a time when we reflect on who we are as the people of God in this place. A time when we acknowledge our journey during the past year and dare to dream about the future we have together.

Today's meeting reflects on such a difficult year – and yet we have so much to be thankful for even in the face of a challenging pandemic. As I prepared this week however, with everything that has been in the media about racial justice, about the Church of England, about poverty and the impact of the pandemic on those we are most poor and most vulnerable; about world earth day and our care of God's creation – I have to admit to feeling overwhelmed and often full of grief at the task that lays ahead of us. It is too easy for us in our relative comfort and wealth to make the saving grace of God an intellectual and spiritual pursuit – rather than remembering as John reminds us, that we are part

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3628

of one flock, one body, one community – which is about our very being – and many are crying out everyday.

We are on a journey together, even when it makes us feel uncomfortable. It is one we share with many others, even when we don't agree. It is one where we might reveal more of ourselves that we might have liked. But one of the joys of the resurrection is that it invites us to see everything afresh – to remember the power of hope and change. What overwhelms us at present, may in time be the source of great celebration as change takes place.

One of the gifts of Easter, the resurrection and even an annual meeting is that it invites us to question. What have we learnt? What do we need to change? What do we need to embrace? It is our job as a community to hold each other to account, and if we find this a challenge, maybe we need to remember the experience of the early Church.

In the reading we heard from Acts 4 today, Peter is asked to account for what he has been doing and in whose name. Peter faced death in the way that he answered the question; our achievement as a parish does not have such a violent potential outcome to the questions we are asked – though for some if we do not act with integrity if we do not ask the right questions – there may well be consequences we had not foreseen.

John called the early church to *love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action*². And I do hope that this is what we do; I think this is then the way that we make sense of the world – both those things which challenge us and brings us grief; as well as those things which bring us hope and joy. I think to it is probably the key to how we reflect on what we are doing!

The promise of the Easter message is that we are people who are known and loved by God; and that God's gift to us is abundant love. Our readings today are intended to flesh out this promise so that we might not lose hope – and that we might be invited to have the courage to know ourselves and to know each other – helping us make sense of the world.

² 1 John 3: 18

They may sound like simple statements – but they are not always simple to live out because they embrace the mystery and wonder of God – something which is meant to be beyond our reasoning – *for God is greater than our hearts.*³ Amen.

³ 1 John 3: 20b