

.²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. *John 10:27*

Whenever I read those words in St John's Gospel my mind goes back to a hillside in Galilee. Rachel and I had lead a group to the Holy Land and this particular day had been spent on Lake Galilee. Towards the end of the day our group had celebrated communion on the hills overlooking the Lake. We were relaxing while we waited for our bus to come and collect us. As we sat there a shepherd came by, leading his flock. One of the younger sheep spotted something tasty by the side of the road and stopped to eat it. By the time it had finished, the rest of the flock had moved on. The poor thing looked up to see no flock or shepherd, just a bunch of complete strangers staring at it. Panic set in and it started bleating frantically. The shepherd, now some way off, heard the noise and called out. The sheep heard the familiar voice and ran off to join it. The shepherd had heard the cry for help and responded; the sheep recognised the familiar voice and headed towards it.

There is a picture here of deep belonging. The sheep belongs to that flock not by any action of its own, not by any virtue of its own – it simply belongs and will continue to do so for as long as the shepherd so desires. Following Jesus has at its heart this sense of belonging, of knowing who we follow. Looking back over my own pilgrimage, this sense of belonging, of knowing whom I follow, very much pre-dated any understanding of Christian doctrine, came long before a particularly detailed knowledge of the Bible. Rather it was in the context of a relationship, a sense of belonging, that I came to grow in my understanding of scripture or Christian doctrine.

And so I began my own walk with Jesus not really sure who I was following or indeed why. Concepts such as atonement, redemption, the doctrine of the Trinity did not enter my thoughts for some considerable time. What I did know was that Jesus was special and I wanted to know more. There was also that definite feeling that my search mattered to him – that he was not indifferent to my search – he reached out to me and drew me further on.

The religious leaders who confronted Jesus in the Temple precincts were coming at things from a very different angle. ‘How long will you keep us in suspense?’ Literally, how long will you take our life from us? ‘If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’ These men knew exactly who they were looking for. They were looking for the Messiah of Jewish national expectations. A strong national leader who would lift the Roman yoke, who would establish the Kingdom of Israel as God’s rule on earth.

I think of the question that John the Baptist sent to Jesus from his prison cell; ‘Are you the one – or are we to wait for another?’; and the answer that Jesus sent back, ‘Tell John what you see, the blind see, the lame walk and the poor have the Good News preached to them.’ Jesus is not confined by human categories. His agenda is set not by human expectations; nor by our understanding of God’s purposes. The religious leaders of the day were basically asking Jesus for information – they would then decide whether or not he fitted the bill.

Jesus protests that there is already ample evidence available to them in the works that he has done. They do not believe because they are not his sheep. In other words Jesus is a stranger to them, to their mind set, to their expectations. The first step in understanding Jesus is to take the risk of listening, of following where he leads. The disciples, at the outset of Jesus’ ministry, responded to a call to leave all and follow him. They did not at that stage understand who he was. That came later, much later. All they did know was that he had laid a claim on them and they felt they could do no other than follow.

He then goes on to promise protection to the flock, to those who hear the voice. As I was saying earlier, I sensed, in the context of my own beginnings in the faith, that I had the feeling that my search mattered to Jesus, that as I reached out to him, he reached out to me, drawing me closer to his presence. He promises, of his sheep, that no-one can snatch them out of his hand. The word that is used here for ‘snatch’ is the same as that used of a

wolf that attacks the fold. Such protection comes at the cost of the loss of the Shepherd's life; the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

That is a protection that stands firm in the face of all tribulation, all fear, all anxiety. I think of Paul's declaration in his letter to the Church at Rome:

³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. *Rom 8:35, 37-39*

A promise that reaches its fulfilment in the vision of the heavenly court in the Revelation to St John the Divine:

they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.
¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
¹⁷for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.' *Rev7:15-17*

The Christ who calls is the Christ who strengthens and protects, who gives himself for the sake of the sheep.