

Reflections on the Good Shepherd and the Responsibility of the Sheep (John 10, 1-10)

I watched the news the other day when the BBC aired a piece about a church in South London is selling fake Coronavirus 'protection kits' and the 'divine cleansing oil' claiming that a small bottle priced at £91 would definitely protect the followers from the virus. Apparently, the church has already sold a good quantity of these. Obviously, the Charity Commission and the Trading Standards are looking into this. The Gospel reading for this Sunday takes my mind back to this story. John 10,1-10 identifies himself as the true shepherd (Jesus offered also the image of the gate; but I want to focus on the image of the shepherd). Jesus is saying that his own sheep listen to his voice; which implies that there are sheep that do not hear his voice. He is saying that there are pseudo shepherds who take advantage of the sheep and that sheep ought not to listen to their voice. The story of the church in London selling fake protection kits and medicine make us think seriously not only about those who take advantage of the people they lead; but also about us; how easy it is to follow the wrong leadership. There was an outcry last week from Trump's suggestion that injecting disinfectant could be a treatment for Coronavirus. Before long, some Americans started to telephone to check whether what the President had said was true. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that some had already injected themselves. Now hold on to these stories as we explore what Jesus is saying here in this story.

Jesus is saying that the shepherd in the story has the well-being of the sheep at heart, rather than his own well-being. This shepherd is neither thief nor bandit who would steal sheep; he wouldn't do anything that would harm the sheep. Jesus emphasizes a particular difference between the bandit and shepherd: the shepherd enters rightly, properly, and sheep respond to the sound of their name. There is a relationship of trust among all parties here. This is why it is important for us to note that the sheep Jesus are talking about in the story are not dumb. They can hear, can tell the true shepherd from the false one, they can follow or flee false shepherds; in short, they are able to "know" whom to trust. It is the responsibility of the shepherd to bring the sheep out of the fold and to go before them. Equally it is the responsibility of the sheep to follow. This means that the sheep do not simply escape from the fold or confinement and rush off into the larger dangerous world on their own. Their shepherd leads them out and then goes before them; and the sheep follow. What do we learn from this image Jesus paints for us?

First, reflecting on our lockdown life, I am brought to think that when we emerge from this situation, we will need God's guidance. The world we will emerge into; the world we will see and live in will be much different from the one we knew before Coronavirus. We have been saying all along that Jesus is with us – in whatever state we are – healthy, ill, grieving – he is with us. But we will need him to hold our hands and teach us how to live in the new world we are going to face.

Secondly Jesus tells us that he is the good shepherd of Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34, the leader whose work and life are for the sheep and their well-being. His role is to protect the sheep and provide for them. This is in contrast with those who prey upon the sheep for their own purposes, diminishing the flock and creating anxiety within it. This is where I connect to the story of selling fake protection kits, or false medicine, or even standing in front of the camera and invite millions of vulnerable citizens that injecting themselves with disinfectant could cure them. Should sheep listen to this kind of shepherd? Should sheep follow this kind of shepherd?

Thirdly and as I said earlier the sheep in the story are not dumb; they can hear, discern the voice of the true shepherd from the bandit, they can trust and follow. What kind of sheep are we? How many times have we jumped on the bandwagon of a promise cure like the 'divine cleansing oil' or injecting ourselves with disinfectant? Little has changed from the time of Jesus' ministry in Palestine all those centuries ago. As people seemed to pay attention to those who lied to them, so do we. Whether it is because the pseudo shepherd's voice is sugar-coated, or whether it is human inability to listen to something that makes sense, I am not sure what it is. As one Bible scholar suggested, maybe it could be that hearing Jesus' voice does not

always happen easily even for those who are closest to him. The good news is that neither the good shepherd nor sheep abandon one another.

May the good Shepherd stay with you wherever you are this weekend. May you discern his voice and his guidance. **Amen**

Paul Nzacahayo

Prayer by Rev. John Taylor – written shortly before he died a few days ago.

Revd John Taylor was a Methodist Tutor and Tutor in Systematic Theology at Queen's in the 1980's. He also served as Secretary of the Methodist Church Faith and Order Committee. Following his time at Queen's he became the General Secretary of the Methodist Church Division of Ministries, and then Chair of the Liverpool District. He served as President of the Methodist Conference in 1997-8. I thought the prayers he wrote speak to my reflections above and also to our current situation.

Let us pray.

Gracious God and Father of us all, whose will is that not one of his precious children should perish, help us to know that we are loved and to rejoice in the many blessings which you have prepared for us. Thank you for what we can learn even in difficult circumstances.

(Pause for silent reflection)

We thank you, Lord, that we have discovered what it feels like to be lonely and cut off. Thank you that we have gained insight into what solitary confinement in our prisons feels like and how our housebound auntie copes when we never visit her.

(Pause for silent reflection)

Forgive us that in the midst of plenty we hoard food and act as if tomorrow depends on it. Help us to recognise that there is sufficient for all, that in the midst of grain mountains and wine lakes we still sit in a land of plenty and that such emergency reserves are there for use today. Help us, Lord, to make the needs of the poorest our priority.

(Pause for silent reflection)

We live in warm and comfortable homes, safe and secure. We pray for those who live in cardboard boxes. Help us to remember them and to unlock the means for them to return to significant relationships.

(Pause for silent reflection)

We pray, gracious, living God, when we are lost and disorientated that we may each find you walking at our side, our Companion and our Guide.

We pray through our Intercessor who sits at your right hand, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**