

Sermon Acts 4:5-12 and John 10: 11-18

Our Psalm set for this morning is perhaps unsurprisingly Psalm 23 - The Lord is my Shepherd - one of the most popular Psalms in the Bible. Once there was a competition for the best reading of Psalm 23 which was to be judged by a panel of judges. The day of the competition came and amongst the competitors was a well known actor with a wonderful voice. He read the Psalm perfectly, enunciating every word beautifully, and emphasising phrases with great skill. Following on from him an old man came up and read the Psalm in a quiet, yet sincere way. After he finished there was a hush in the room as he returned to his seat. When the results came in the old man had won the competition. Someone asked the actor if he was surprised by the result and he replied, 'No, not at all, I realised that I knew the Psalm but the elderly gentleman knows the shepherd'.

The subject of our Gospel this morning is not only concerned with knowing Jesus as our shepherd but essentially and specifically as our **good** shepherd. Jesus addresses the Pharisees and says, 'I am the **good** shepherd' - he doesn't say 'I am the great shepherd' or 'I am the mighty shepherd' - he says 'I am the **good** shepherd'. The Pharisees as leaders of the people were supposed to be good shepherds so Jesus' words here may well have struck a personal note of challenge for them. But Jesus knows it is vital for us to know above all else that He is good. It seems to me that the essential battle, the most common struggle in the Christian journey is to hold firm the belief and the focus that God is good. Why do I say that? Because so much that comes into our lives either directly in our experience or indirectly as the needs of our world bombard our senses daily through the media - so much is **not** good. In addition, many of our examples of care and authority have been, rather like the Pharisees were, sometimes unhelpful and at worse positively harmful. As the election campaign rumbles on painfully we are all confronted by leaders looking for votes and proclaiming amazing and unbelievable promises. In the light of these realities so often our hearts can become doubtful and cynical through our life experience. We need to know, to be assured, that **God is good** in order to live confidently and bravely in our world.

In Psalm 23 we find David describing his experience of **knowing** the good shepherd and in our Gospel Jesus says I know my own and my own know me. This is not just an intellectual knowledge it is a real relational knowledge. We are invited to know, experience and prove the love and goodness of Jesus for ourselves in a relationship that grows and develops over time. David tells us he has found that his needs have all been met by God's goodness. He has not been driven on from behind at a frantic pace but he has been led to lie down, to rest and find nourishment. He has realised that the Lord cares for him and knows his needs. He has drunk from still waters and found his soul healed and refreshed by being in God's presence. He has been guided by the Lord along right pathways when he would have gone astray. But, he has also known the comfort of the Lord's presence when faced by enemies and things that would harm him. We know David's life had its fair share of personal failure, persecution from enemies like Saul and even family disappointments. David proved God's goodness in the crucible of personal suffering. He is convinced, along with the apostle Paul, that nothing even death itself can separate him from the love and provision that have brought him fullness and healing.

And he knows it is has only come because of the Lord's goodness and mercy which is why in our gospel Jesus reminds us that the ultimate proof of His goodness is not to be found in our circumstances but in the fact that He has laid down His life for us on the Cross. To follow Jesus, really follow him will lead us to both green pastures and also into the presence of enemies and the valley of the shadow of death. Which is where the early church so often found themselves. There is an incident early on in the story 'The Lion, the

Witch, and the Wardrobe' by C S Lewis, when the children have just entered Narnia and have met Mr and Mrs Beaver. Over tea, Mr and Mrs Beaver try to tell the children all about life in Narnia, and particularly about Aslan who represents Jesus in Lewis' allegory. A part of the conversation goes like this, Mrs Beaver says,

"Aslan is a lion - the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he - quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"..."Safe?" said Mr Beaver ..."Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

In that little exchange we have the crux of our Gospel reading today as well as our reading from the book of Acts. Who said anything about safe?- because after the disciples have met the risen Jesus, and after they have been filled with the Holy Spirit in the upper room these once fearful and timid men and women are transformed into bold and fearless witnesses to the risen Christ. Here in Acts we find the apostles brought before the authorities for healing the crippled beggar. The Holy Spirit it seems propels them not on a 'safe' course but one in which the power of the risen Jesus is allowed to break out into situations that are crying out for a manifestation of the goodness of God - in this case a life-changing healing. For the apostles this meant threats and persecution from the authorities, but these were not men looking for a 'safe' life - they had met the risen Jesus and they could never be the same again. Later we find them being imprisoned and flogged for preaching about Jesus. There is something about following Jesus that is decidedly unsafe. We so often want to tame the Lion, and domesticate God and have enough of Him just to make us comfortable but Jesus invites us to follow Him on His way. And for the early church it was a way that created a holy disruption and disturbance, and if we allow Jesus to meet us as we are we will be changed and transformed by the encounter just as the early disciples were changed. They lived boldly, sometimes dangerously as they followed Jesus, strengthened by the knowledge that the shepherd they were following was above all else .. good!