

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Collect: Almighty God, whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life: raise us, who trust in him, from the death of sin to the life of righteousness, that we may seek those things which are above, where he reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Acts 4.5–12: The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family.

⁷ When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, ‘By what power or by what name did you do this?’ ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹ This Jesus is “the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.” ¹² There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.’

Gospel: John 10.11–18: ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.’

Reflection:

The experience of Covid bringing serious illness, death and then, living through and after loss, has been the experience of many people this last year and in other situations of loss people will also be able to connect with this.

Those who have died from Covid following their caring for others, or by providing a public service or continuing in work that involved close mixing with others gives us, in some way, a connection to what is going on when we say “someone lays down their life” for others. The concept that Jesus spoke about in relation to a shepherd for a sheep but which we might also identify with other professions and other life relationships.

A person putting to one side their safety or security, perhaps their future hopes and aspirations for another person. And that other person might be someone they do not know or someone who might give nothing or very little back in return, including a person who might be very self-obsessed.

Peter, the apostle does not quite fit this category but when he speaks to the religious leaders in Jerusalem, we should for a moment pause to remember how this close friend of Jesus has changed. He was the fearful denier, of ever knowing Jesus, whose later understanding of the significance of Jesus’ laying down his life, now he finds Jesus abiding within him, alive, and within the community he is part of.

Central to the message of Easter is the restoring of Peter. Peter who had talked big, who assured Jesus of his undying loyalty but who had betrayed him by denying that he had ever known him. This denial spoken to a servant girl, another woman, we might note, included in the Passion and Easter story.

The writer of John's Gospel, as he does later with the women followers of Jesus, particularly Mary Magdalene, includes a woman in this significant part of the narrative, with the questioning of Peter by a servant girl.

We must recognise that, at that moment of crisis, Peter was a broken man and this means that his later restoration as leader of the Christian community can be understood as such a significant transformation. He could get things so completely wrong but still not take himself outside the love of God. Forgiven and commissioned for service by Jesus, we recognise that there is nothing a person can do and nowhere a person be, that can take them away from being loved by God or, that their life can be transformed for good.

Peter's experience of being raised is when he takes up his role as shepherd to the sheep and he can do this because he knows that he is truly loved and that the love he knows is for all people to experience and live, and to dwell within.

Peter's conversion was not from no faith to true faith: more from faith bound by convention, tradition and culture that could not move beyond this, when he was alongside Jesus, listening to his teaching and seeing his actions. Only after the arrest and trial, the suffering and crucifixion, does Peter come to a place when he can meet with Jesus and say, "You know Lord that I Love you."

All that went before, including those times when he and others talked of wanting a higher place in the scheme of things, are put in a different perspective because of their recognising that Jesus as suffering servant and forgiving victim has taken the old ways of religious sacrifice and given these a radical transformation.

This being about the worth of every person and giving of hope to all people whatever may have gone before and indeed under whatever system of control their lives may have been bound or constrained by.

Women first grasped this because of the hope they had found in Jesus when they followed him knowing they were truly loved and valued, and it is why those women stay with Jesus in his suffering and why Mary Magdalene is shown to be the key witness to the new beginning of Easter.