

Easter 4, 2020
Amersfoort, Groningen

Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-10
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The Shepherd We Can Trust and the Living Church We Can Be

We live in trying times. Some leaders in healthcare and in government have understandably compared this pandemic situation to fighting a war. Against an invisible foe.

We fervently pray that God helps us overcome it, and that soon we will can emerge from lockdown and celebrate liberation, albeit in a sensible, careful and probably gradual way that will not give the viral enemy even more opportunities to do damage. But we look forward to enjoying greater freedom and each other's company, certainly! Like Europe did 75 years ago.

But our fight is not yet over, though we can and do see light ahead. But let us be patient and persevere in peace and faith, and listen to the voice of reason. For God endowed us with intelligence, for a reason.

Philip Snowden, a British govt minister in the First World War, observed that, sadly, "Truth," it has been said, "is the first casualty of war." Untruth is flying about in our current health crisis, despite the considerable progress science and medicine have made this last century.

Which is why the words of Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd who laid down his life for us, speak to our situation. We so need to listen to the voice of our Lord, whom we can trust, truly I believe. He sincerely cares for us and our safety. Not all do, sadly.

Just before our Gospel reading today, Jesus was reprimanded by Pharisees for daring to restore the sight of a man born blind, on the Sabbath of all days. The formerly blind man came to see the light of Christ, but some remained critical.

In today's reading, Jesus challenges the Pharisees to reflect on questions of integrity and authenticity. Will they open their eyes and ears and hearts and minds diligently and fairly to evaluate his words and deeds? On the basis of evidence he has lived, can they trust Him or not?

He challenges them: 10:¹ 'Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (Jesus is suggesting: am I not doing what the Father wants, in the way the prophets foretold?)

Now as ever, it is vital to exercise wisdom, and, in all we see and hear, to discern what is trustworthy and consistent with the witness of God in Christ, to stay safe and healthy in body, mind and spirit.

The Book of Revelation, where the apocalypse unfolds, warns us how forces of evil gang up together. When war is afoot, plague often accompanies it, famine will probably come, too, and death follows suit.

In this health crisis, I pray that we keep the faith, and pray that leaders and peoples not be tempted to further destructive behavior, but work together, with God, and for the love of one another, to defeat the evils that like to cause havoc together.

Jesus cautions us against false prophets and thieves; Paul too later alerts the Thessalonians against people of lawlessness, who seek personal gain by sowing discord.

As a beautiful alternative to these dangerous roads, let us follow the way of Christ brilliantly lived out in the First Church there in Jerusalem after the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost!

Had Jesus had been speaking to an audience in our digital age, he might have used a different metaphor than the Shepherd and his voice, familiar in the ancient Near East.

Might he have asked: Is your computer well-protected against hackers? Does your voice-recognition software really work? Can you truly hear the right voice and know the message to trust? Look out for cyber-criminals spreading viruses and clever scams to infect your equipment, corrupt your memory and steal your data. And beware bots trying to fool you into falsehood.

Whatever time we live in, our eternal Savior reminds us we must not be smug about safety, especially our spiritual safety. And we are in deeper difficulty if we lose our capacity to recognize and trust the voice of love and truth. The key here is we need to know and grow in a healthy relationship with Christ. Jesus came to restore our relationship with God and to show us exactly how to recognize and follow God's way. And He promises that all

who believe and trust in him, if they listen to and follow Him, should not be fooled by fakes, but will stay safe.

Jesus is the true and trustworthy Good Shepherd, recognized by the responsible. He says: ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.'

Jesus also then moves to another metaphor, saying also ⁹I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; **I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'**

Jesus used many metaphors, particularly in John's Gospel, to give insight into aspects of who He was and is. The great 'I am' statements. Together, they help us see and understand our Savior more clearly, I believe.

That He is both Shepherd and the Gate makes sense. Coming from the One who is both fully human and fully God, who *taught* us the way back to God but also rightly proclaims the He *is* 'The Way, the Truth and the Life.'

He shows us the Way, but is also, Himself, the Way. He guides us as Shepherd, and is also the gateway to God.

And He is a shepherd who doesn't hesitate to lay down His own life, in the gate of death, in order to save us, to prevent sin, lies and death from stealing us away from Him.

So, mixing metaphors myself, how do we improve our voice recognition capacity, that we may hear and follow our loving Good Shepherd better?

The First Church after Pentecost shows us.

2:⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

John Stott, in his inspiring book, The Living Church, summed up the 4 qualities of this faithful group:

The Living Church is a Learning Church (devoted to growing in faith, to love and serve the Lord).

The Living Church is a Caring Church (which lives love by making sure no one is in need; rejecting selfishness, for everything is sacrificially shared).

The Living Church is a Worshipping Church (which meets wherever and whenever possible, whether in the temple or at home, to give thanks and praise to God).

And the Living Church is a Witnessing Church (not hesitating to share the Good News of Christ with everyone, even and especially in critical circumstances).

Filled with faith, hope and love, that First Church was inherently attractive, precisely not because it was concerned only about itself, but because it avidly looked to

God and to the needs, both spiritual and physical, of others.

Learning, Caring, Worshipping and Witnessing.

We see the life of Christ lived in that First Church.

Because they never lost touch with His voice in their lives.

Let us yearn and strive to live like them, even and especially in this day and age. Our loving Shepherd cares for us and wants us to be safe with Him and help each other to know and follow his trustworthy way.

Even if we are separated from each other physically at the moment, we are spiritually one with Christ, and must continue to strive to be.

For we are part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, which is eternal, born 20 centuries ago, but alive in Christ today. Though currently physically separate, we are one. Though tested by tough times, we are called to live holy lives of love and goodness, for God and for one another. Though we are confined to our homes, we are members of the universal Body of Christ, in all times and all places. Though in lockdown, the Good News of our Risen Lord cannot be contained. And we can share it in new ways.

When Jesus returned to his rightful place in Heaven, the promised Holy Spirit of God, our Comforter and Advocate, powerfully energized the new life of the first believers.

The Spirit still does today, that we may live according to the words of the Word made Flesh, our Loving and Good Shepherd. Whose words and example we forever seek to hear and follow. He is leading us to greener pastures. Amen.