

Sunday 8th May 2022, 4th Sunday of Easter: John 10:22-33 'Listen'

Back when Alise and I used to work for the same company, one of the highlights of the year was the Company Sports Day. Before you get notions of some sort of serious competition, this was more like a Knockout than Diamond League Athletics. Events included the Space Hopper Relay, welly wanging, egg and spoon race, you get the idea – all washed down with a picnic and free drinks all afternoon. What could possibly go wrong? On one occasion several company directors offered to be put in the stocks for charity and people could pay to throw wet sponges at them. All in all, a very cathartic, and hugely enjoyable, experience.

The last event each year was the biggest and most chaotic of all. It was a relay race, where all participants had to run to the end of the course, put a blindfold on, spin on a stick ten times and then try to run back to their team. The team would help them find their way back by shouting out – so each participant had to listen carefully for the voice which enabled them to get home. As you can imagine the fun was in the fact that people were so dizzy they usually ran off at an angle of 45 degrees before falling over in comic fashion. One particularly memorable year Alise ran very fast at an oblique angle straight into the managing director, almost knocking him over. But I digress.

Thankfully I don't remember anyone actually getting hurt – but in a way I think that race feels a lot like life to most of us. The first part of it feels pretty straightforward – but then from secondary school and on through our adult lives, it all gets much trickier. We feel disorientated, bewildered at the complexity of life, which seems to keep spinning us round. Many of us have no idea where we're going most of the time – and even if we do, it can feel daunting trying to get there, like running blindfold and dizzy in a crowd of other blindfolded dizzy people. And there are so many different voices, all shouting for our attention. 'Do this, try that, buy the other.' How do we know which voice we can trust?

Today's passage really boils down to one simple but immensely important and profound observation made by Jesus: **the key thing in all of this is to know which voice to listen to. If we listen to the right voice, everything else will fall into place.** Conversely, if we fail to listen to it, we shouldn't be surprised if the rest of life feels dislocated.

Our story centres around another big religious festival in Jerusalem – thousands of people, thousands of voices. Jesus arrives and immediately gets cornered with the million-dollar question: 'if you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' To which Jesus replies: 'I did tell you, but you do not believe' – or you could paraphrase: 'I did tell you, but you're not listening!'

Let's ignore for a moment that Jesus has *already* said publicly that he is the Messiah – to the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4; this particular audience wouldn't have been there for that. If we exclude that quite open statement, it is true that Jesus has not yet said to the whole crowd using these exact words 'I am the Messiah', or 'the Messiah is me'. On the other hand, he has said: 'I am the bread of life', 'I am the light of the world', and just recently 'I am the Good Shepherd', all of which are pretty clear in their implication to a devout religious audience. He's also told them he will rebuild the temple and offer a stream of life welling up to eternal life.

Most importantly in terms of his answer to the crowd today, he has also shown them numerous amazing miracles – **signs – that show very clearly who he is**. Who else but the Messiah, the Anointed One, could heal spontaneously, or turn water into wine, or feed thousands with one packed lunch?

The point Jesus is making is that people are choosing not to listen. They don't want the sort of spiritual vision Jesus is offering: they want a political leader to rally around, not a humble king to love, follow and serve. They want rebellion not repentance, revolution not renewal.

On the other hand, **Jesus' real flock listen to his voice**. And by listen, let's be clear that this is not just hearing a sequence of words: listening means active engagement. We absorb what Jesus says and try to follow it. In return, Jesus offers us two huge and glorious blessings: the gift of eternal life, and the assurance that we are his forever: no-one can snatch Jesus' love and the promise of his blessings away from us.

Why? Precisely because Jesus *is* the Messiah, the Son of God. This Jesus is one with God the Father – he has divine power to look after and bless his sheep, his followers. And this promise will carry us through not just this life, but onto into eternity: safe in Jesus' care we will never perish.

The original audience didn't like this reply – in fact they thought about stoning him. But what a wonderful encouragement for us to hold on to! To know that this Jesus has all the love and the authority to keep our salvation secure, to bring us eternal life.

In the disorientating relay of life, this is surely the voice that we need to listen to. Yes, there will be many other voices, all competing for our attention, and sometimes we will find it hard to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd: but **let's take Jesus advice and make it our priority to learn to listen to his voice above all the others**.

And as I draw to a close, can I also encourage us all to listen to Jesus' voice as it really is, not the one we'd like it to be. Jesus says lots of amazing things and also some challenging things too. We all face the temptation to soak up the bits we like and tune out the bits which we find harder to embrace. But to do that is to fall into the exact same temptation of the crowd at the temple in our passage: to try and create the Jesus that we want, not as he really is – or, to put it another way, to make Jesus into our image, rather than seek to remake ourselves in his.

The real Jesus is the most amazing, inspiring, radical, life-changing character in all history. We can never plumb the depths of his love or learn all there is to know about him – there's always more, new jewels to find. I pray for myself and for all of us, that we would make it our goal in life to listen to his voice, to follow that voice – and to find in Jesus all we need for life, and for eternity. Amen.