

Earlier in the service we watched the following youtube clip:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2x8MwiTs0hM>

I thought that video clip about 'green pastures' was really intriguing. It's true that when I imagine being invited to 'lie down in green pastures' what really comes to mind is a meadow, or a paddock full of lush grass, and a flock of woolly white sheep grazing quietly beside a river. Never mind that the psalm actually talks about 'still waters', not 'moving waters.' I have imposed on the psalm my imagining of what rest and provision and abundance looks like.

To realise that a sheep at pasture in Jesus' world moved constantly from one small weedy plant to another in an otherwise rocky wilderness is quite a mental shift. And it massively intensifies the role of the shepherd, doesn't it? The shepherd isn't there to guide the sheep from the sheepfold to a place where they can stand and munch all day. The shepherd isn't just there to protect the sheep at night from wild animals and thieves. The shepherd is on the go all day, leading the sheep from one piece of grass to another in a landscape where a sheep that went astray would die of hunger.

As Ray Vander Laan said "In the desert, you learn that the shepherd will get you what you need for right now." It's not always obvious where to go to get the next mouthful. It takes the presence of the shepherd to lead the flock to the grazing trails on the right part of the mountain, where some grass is growing. And today's provision isn't tomorrow's provision – you can't keep going back to the same place every day, you have to move on until more grass has grown in the place where you used to graze. Only following the trusted shepherd can ensure there will be food when you need it, and only the safety of the shepherd's leading gives the sheep enough confidence in the food supply to be able to 'lie down' in the midst of it all – which is what the psalm says the shepherd offers.

If you think about it, if you can't trust where your next bite of grass is coming from, if you don't have confidence that you will receive all you need, you can't rest. You can't lie down in 'green pastures' like the ones on those rocky hillsides unless you have the experience of being full for now, and the belief that when you get up from your rest, you'll be led to a place where you'll be nourished.

Only following the trusted voice of the shepherd allows for easy rest. “I shall not want” is not a statement of being surrounded by everything we could ever want all at once. It’s a statement that affirms that the next thing we need will be given to us, when we need it, and that we can genuinely rest – we don’t need to flog ourselves with non-stop striving.

Likewise, Jesus’ claim to be the trusted shepherd and the gate for the sheep, and his wonderful statement ‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly’, doesn’t mean that we will instantly and constantly be surrounded by all the goods of life and never have to lift a finger ever again. It means that at every turn, our Lord will guide us to the next right thing, to the place where what we need will be right there for us. It also means that when something we loved and enjoyed gets taken away, instead of clinging on to the barren, rocky place where it used to be, we still be able to thrive if we allow ourselves to be led on to the next source of joy and nourishment.

The Christian life is never static. There is always movement – and even if we’re people who have a pretty stable, settled life physically, we still grow and develop – our ideas mature and change, we respond differently to the world around us, we adapt to new challenges and experiences. Just think back over the last, say, 5-10 years of your life and ponder how many new things you, personally, have had to get used to. Some of us have learned new technologies – some of us have adapted to email or zoom or the use of a smartphone app to get where we need to go by bus or taxi. Some of us have moved city or country and had to find and establish ourselves in whole new communities. Some of us have changed jobs or schools, others have been bereaved and had to adjust to a whole new pattern of life without a beloved life partner. Some of our folk have experienced the loss of their church and have come here to find a new place to worship. We’ve all learned a new vocabulary around public health, and the use of masks in containing the spread of illness.

When we experience these changes as Christians, we can find enormous comfort in knowing that we’re not just flailing about trying to find our way in life under our own steam, guessing wildly at the next best thing and trying to make judgement calls about what’s good and not good to do without a measuring rod to help guide our choices.

No, as those who follow Jesus, we are people who are 'led' – not blindly or stupidly, not because we're childish fools who don't know how to live our lives for ourselves. We are led willingly and consciously because we trust the voice of Someone who sees further and wider than us, who knows where there is good pasture for us, and who is willing to sacrifice everything for our wellbeing and safety in a harsh and difficult world.

There are all sorts of other claims on our attention, our desires, our commitment, but those of us who know the voice of Jesus recognise these voices for what they are: 'thieves and bandits' that come to 'steal, kill and destroy.' There are so many lies that fill our world, assaulting and undermining the goodness of the abundant life that is ours in Christ. They look pretty, but they're deadly. Our earliest Christian ancestors knew that a significant part of the 'training', the discipline, of the Christian life is about learning to recognise and resist these lies and instead keep choosing Jesus' way, truth and life.

Filling our minds with the words and images of the Scriptures, especially the gospels, is one way that we learn what Jesus' voice sounds like. Praying with these words and images in the daily office or the prayer of the Church is another. And a third way is in worship, in community, as we come to recognise the presence of the Holy Spirit – that movement within our own spirit that quickens to Jesus' voice.

Jesus calls each one of us by name and leads us out. He goes ahead of us and we follow him because we know his voice. He will lead us where we need to go to find life – real, abundant, wholesome, filling, eternal life. Where is Jesus going now? What is he leading us into? We don't know for sure, but it will be safe and it will be good, even if it's scary or strange. Let's keep listening for his voice.