

Our reading today from John 10:1-10 follows on from the story of Jesus healing a blind man on the Sabbath and the Pharisees determination that this meant that Jesus had to be a sinner. It began with Jesus declaring that the man was not responsible for his physical blindness and ends with Jesus declaring that the Pharisees are responsible for their spiritual blindness. John continues::

John 10:1-10

I want to look at this passage from the perspective of three names: “Yours”, “Shepherd” and “Gate”

In verse 3 John tell us that the true shepherd “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” Later on Jesus tells us that he is the Good shepherd and we, as his followers are his sheep. If we also remember that in biblical thought the concept of “name” wasn’t just about identity – it also involves, personality and behaviour – we get a marvellous picture of the love of Jesus embracing each one of us.

This distinction between being just one of a crowd and being known personally came home in a powerful way to me this week. On Tuesday I received the sad news that the man who had been churchwarden in my previous parish had died. On the same day the government figures reported 546 deaths of Covid-19 in hospital. Now those 546 are 546 tragedies but I was only able to note them superficially. Hover the news of the one death - the death of Stan – was a cause of sadness – I found myself recalling what he was like, the times we prayed together – the way that he and his wife Margaret had a special ministry of hospitality. You see, Stan isn’t a number to me, he isn’t a statistic to me - I knew him by name.

I wonder today how many feel they are reduced to a statistic – or feel they have become lost or hidden as they self-isolate? The NHS are reporting their concern about the number of people not reporting other illness as they feel their problems are not important enough to bother the busy doctors. One person who is shielded shared how they were grateful for the generic box of groceries they received – but the contents revealed the lack of understanding of their normal diet and reinforced that they were not seen as an individual but as a problem to be resolved. Still others have found mental health services they need cut reinforcing their sense that they are viewed as less important than others.

Into the darkness of our current situation where so many feel themselves a mere statistic, of lesser value or forgotten, this passage blazes with the light of hope. Whoever you are – whatever your situation, however you may have behaved in the past, no matter how much you feel neglected or abandoned – **Jesus calls you by name** - in his eyes you are a valued and loved individual - he understand your situation, he knows your fears and your joys, your successes and failures – even if you feel yourself to forgotten and abandoned you are so special that – even if no-one else had needed it - he would still have died for you.

If, in your situation, you need to hear this today then could I suggest you pause this video and go and write out “MY name is..... and Jesus knows MY name. Then go and stick this on the first mirror you look at in the morning – and make sure you read it out loud each time you look in that mirror.

The second name “Shepherd” would have come as a surprise to those listening. Let me explain:....

Last week Gerald Hovendon preached our sermon at home. He was preaching in my place – but if he had introduced himself as the Vicar of Holy Trinity you’d have responded – “no you’re not – We have only one vicar – you may be a vicar, but the title of Vicar of Holy Trinity, Heworth has already been taken”. When Jesus said “I am the Good Shepherd!” they would have been thinking – “You can’t say that - that title has already been taken by God – only God can say “I am the Good Shepherd!”

Let’s just go back a bit in Israel’s history. When God called Abraham – he was the one who showed Abraham where to go and how to live. Later, when God used Moses to bring the people out of Egypt he led the people with a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Moses became God’s representative – revealing God’s will, judgement and purposes to the people. Later the task of representing God’s will, judgement and purpose to the people was passed to the priests who too often used their positions for their own benefit and neglected God’s ways and so the people turned away from the living God’s protection and became vulnerable to attack from other nations.

In Ezekiel 34 God pronounces judgement on these failed shepherds who had not looked after the flock and promises that he himself will come and shepherd his people – rescuing the flock who have been scattered and leading them to good pasture – restoring the hope that David had proclaimed in Psalm 23. In typical Hebrew parallelism he claims that he will be the good shepherd but also that his servant David will be their shepherd. In describing himself as the Shepherd Jesus, in a way that no-one would have misunderstood, was making the bold claim that he is the owner of that name – he is God himself. – the Shepherd come to lead God’s people into the riches of His Kingdom. The Pharisees had become like the leaders Ezekiel had prophesied against – they didn’t live their lives by entering through the gate, but dishonestly climbing over the wall of lies. True sheep - True followers of Jesus – would recoil from them.

Just in case anyone had missed the truth of Jesus as Shepherd, he changes his metaphor and introduces the third name – he is now the “gate”. It is through the gate that the sheep pass for rest, security and for pasture. The blind man had found that it was through Jesus he received his sight – the alternative voices of the pharisees led to darkness. Jesus is the true gate – the true way to life in all tis fulness.

In a world of alternative facts and confusing ideologies Jesus reminds us again that he is the one true way to the richness of God’s Kingdom and he calls you and me by name to follow him the one true shepherd.