

## What difference does it make to have a faith?

Once I was asked to say grace. The occasion was a Barn Dance. Fish and chips were arriving. Me being me and somewhat mischievous prayed thus. "Lord we thank you for this lovely food and our time today. For you promised us that we would have life.....and life in a barn dance". (Say it outloud!) That was, in case you hadn't realised, an intentional misquote of John 10v10. You can't take me anywhere I'm afraid!

Our reading today is John chapter 10 and the first ten verses. We can read this in conjunction with everybody's favourite Psalm, the Shepherd Psalm 23. Let's use this well-known ancient text to help address the question 'what difference does it make having a faith?'

These are certainly very challenging time. Those who have largely gone their own God-ignoring way been confronted with some new realities. The reality that life is not guaranteed. The reality that we are not masters of our own destiny. The reality that life is fragile and death more real that we would wish.

It is of course very good that people are pulling together much more. It's significant that politicians and celebrities have spoken more about 'prayer' during the past weeks than they have done in a lifetime. The rainbow has become a symbol of hope. The NHS app for volunteers has been called GoodSam with a clear nod towards the Good Samaritan. The Queen has spoken of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus and the hope this offers for all.

That well-known 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm shows us that we need not be anxious or afraid. There are many who are fearful – fearful of this invisible enemy, fearful of strangers, fearful of the future. None of us want to catch this thing but we really need not live a life of fear. Faith can help us live out a non-anxious presence even in the turbulence of these times.

It is especially hard when we have to grapple with our own reality of being stuck in doors. Here's a serious thought. What does it mean to need to be physically present? With my grandchildren, I can chat on Zoom. I can phone round the congregations. These are voices that come down the phone wires or images that come up on screen. Do they belong to real people? Of course they do but we see and feel them second hand maybe. I have taken to reading electronic books which at first I thought I would never do since I love the physicality of a book. Or many are watching old films or recycled dramas (watched the first ever episode of Spooks last week!). The point is that with each of these experiences, you could say they are detached and not quite a live event. Maybe it's the difference between going to the cinema and the theatre?

Why do I mention this way of being in the world we're all having to cope with? Here's the thing. Although not tangible and physically present, the Lord can be nonetheless real to us, we can experience that calm and sense of inner peace because your whole framework of life is secure.

To come to the text directly, here's a confession. For many years of preaching on it, I didn't understand it. Yes I understood each metaphor in John 10- the doorway entrance and the Shepherd. But I didn't grasp how these tied together until an ex-colleague preached on this. Then I got it. The Middle Eastern shepherd would sit in front of the entrance to the pen or compound, which was usually surrounded by a low wall. There he would sit: watching and guarding.

So what's the point of having a faith? What difference will it make right now?

Firstly, it gives us A POINT. A solid faith in God through Jesus Christ shows us that we matter, we matter to God. Our lives are not insignificant. Think about what matters to you right now? What are the things you know deep down that are worth working on and thinking about? Maybe many people are having to completely re-think what is important to them. Maybe the dimension of faith has never been terribly relevant. But it is through faith that we can have that assurance that the Lord really is our Shepherd. Though not physically present, that can be no less real. We are known to God. The Shepherd knows us by name! It means we are not insignificant. We matter to God.

Secondly it gives us PEACE and PROTECTION. The sheep can have confidence that their Shepherd will take care of things. They do not need to be anxious or afraid. Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will not fear the evil day or the pestilence that stalks by night (Psalm 91). Who will we trust in these days to get us through the crisis? The politicians: experts maybe? Dear Friends, Jesus Christ is a reliable Guide. We can follow Him- His teaching and what He does for the utterly unworthy because of His death and resurrection. He laid down his life for the sheep (v11). Our eternal soul is safe. 'Whoever enters by me will be saved' (v11). Security!!

Thirdly it gives us PURPOSE. 'I have come that you might have LIFE' said Jesus, and life more abundantly. Now you can spell this word 'life' in different ways. Some find out that what they have been chasing is a mirage, an empty barren wilderness. They have been missing the F out of the word and following a LIE. Others have lived their lives with a strong sense of if only; "if only I hadn't done things like that. If only I could have my time over again. If only I hadn't married that person or followed the broken promise of this relationship or that career path". Shut in as we are in these days, you might have all kinds of regrets & guilt. You are spelling the word as if you have missed out the L and the E – IF! But it is through the Lord Jesus Christ that our souls can flourish.

Jesus gives us the ultimate fulfilment, a fulfilment that comes from a connection with God through him. He is not only the shepherd who proposes to guide you into the way of peace and a life that has a point, he gives you a doorway to a life now and ultimately, eternal life.

Some people are worried about the stranger coming towards them and want to move out the way in case they have Coronavirus. Others are happy to say hello to complete strangers and exchange a few words. That's been great to see. Interesting that Jesus said 'my sheep will not follow the stranger' (much as we would strongly discourage a child getting into a car with a stranger in our day). Instead, God's followers will hear and respond to the voice of God. I don't mean a literal voice but a clear teaching about Jesus Christ and the way to God that keeps us on the right track. Jesus said on another occasion 'if you follow me you shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life – I AM the light of the world.' It is a peace of knowing we are secure and on the right path.

It doesn't matter which church you are from or whether you have a faith or no faith. What matters is a personal connection you can have with God through Jesus Christ as you put your trust in Him.

There is a great deal of fear and insecurity right now. A very pressing reality in the news and in our circle of family and friends maybe is that there is much to distress us. May God help us to open our lives so a relationship with Him through Jesus Christ can be an even greater new reality. Faith in God through Him is like a patchwork quilt that makes sense of the whole thing. In him we are safe!