

Because they are not my sheep

a sermon preached on the

4th Sunday of Easter

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Acts 9:36-43; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

There is a paradox embedded in the Christian proclamation which we experience as utterly insoluble – this side of the grave at any rate! In our modern era, especially, it has become normative for us to proclaim a universal salvation which is offered by Christ – the boundless love of God in the crucified and risen Christ which extends to all people. Our forebears, on the other hand, did not have the difficulty we have in accepting the notion of perdition – for them it seemed obvious. Our modern sensibilities feel scandalised by their damnation language, not surprisingly. I'm speaking about something I have felt only too acutely myself, I hasten to add. The notion of a divided humanity, into the saved and unsaved, was more than I could bear intellectually and morally – so I have spent many years working very hard, intellectually, to 'solve' the problem. There are various ways one can go about this – the appeal to nature, to reason, to science, to ethics, to decency, to Biblical texts. Highlighting the texts which emphasise God's desire for all to be 'saved' is an obvious approach.

Unfortunately, no matter how hard I have tried in this endeavour, I have to finally admit to myself that for every text which emphasises God's all-embracing inclusion, there is another (or several others!) which boldly declare the opposite. And, contrary to the fond Christian notion that Jesus 'fixed up' everything which was a problem in the distant, judgemental and rather violent YHWH, the hard truth is that this is just not so. St Matthew's startling text is memorable: "I came not to bring peace, but a sword!"¹ There's no escaping it, I'm afraid, the Christian proclamation contains both declarations – a universal, all-encompassing salvation; and a division.

The latter is what we are presented with on this fourth Sunday of Easter – paradoxically the day we call 'Good Shepherd Sunday', because every year we hear a part of chapter ten of John's gospel, an extended discourse about the shepherd. The religious leaders want to know when Jesus will put them out of their ignorant misery and tell him whether or not he is the Messiah. What a joke this is - if they are the religious leaders, the experts in the sacred texts, then surely they of all people would know! But of course they don't know, and they don't 'believe' in the one who is manifesting the Father in their very sight.

Why not? John's Jesus answers this question surprisingly explicitly: "You do not believe *because* you do not belong to my sheep."² I have noticed this surprising statement for the first time. The causative link is very clear. Not belonging to his sheep is the *cause* of not believing. What an astonishing thought! Unbelief is not the result of being bad, or stupid, or greedy – but only because they are not Jesus' sheep!

Which begs two questions: How can it be that if Jesus is the great Shepherd there can be any sheep that are not his? And whose sheep are they then? The Johannine answer to the second question is that they are the sheep of the devil, or Satan. Neither John nor any of the evangelists really answer the first question – there's some skirting around, but in fact they and the whole Christian tradition endlessly fudge on this impenetrable question – what is the limitation in the great Shepherd such that he does not have all the sheep in his care? That question is unthinkable,

¹ Matthew 10:34

² John 10:26

indeed, because it implies some kind of limitation within the very nature of the Shepherd, a scurrilous thought which we dare not even consider! The world wants to know, however, and finds the church's stock answer, its literal appeal 'the Fall', unsatisfactory. Especially unsatisfactory is the church's standard answer to the first question, because it simply does not adequately deal with the question of the origin of evil in a cosmos which is claimed to be the work of the Divine logos in whom all things have their being.³

In spite of our scandalised sensibility, John is very clear on this matter – unbelief is the consequence of belonging to another shepherd. Christian tradition had only way of explaining this problem, making the devil or Satan the other 'shepherd', the diabolical one. And had only one way of explaining why some belong to this diabolical shepherd – because they chose to thus belong.

Thus is the Christian proclamation seemingly schizophrenic – proclaiming a universal salvation, on the one hand, insisting on a dividedness of humankind on the other. The latter is perhaps most explicit, and most offensive to our modern sensibilities, in the Revelation to St John the Divine – whose symbol for delineating between the saved and the unsaved is having ones robes washed in the blood of the Lamb.⁴

But if we can get past our moral affront, it is possible to observe precisely what John is getting at in our own experience. No matter how much 'progress' we make in the spiritual life, no matter how hard we try or how high we feel we might have ascended, there always remains some aspect of ourselves which seems to belong to 'another shepherd'. We cannot rid ourselves of this reality within us – it will make itself known to us somehow, some way, some time. To our rational consciousness this 'other' is bound to feel like some kind of enemy. This must be what St Paul experienced too, when he talked about doing the thing he did not want to do, and not doing the thing he did want to do.⁵ To deny this fact, which any honest person can experience for themselves, does us no good at all. All attempts at a one-sidedness are bound to lead to a breakout of its opposite, sooner or later. Both honesty and hope depend upon facing this fact squarely.

So 'unbelief' has something to do with a natural and inescapable division *within* our very selves – which is admittedly an endless source of frustration – the origin of which remains very much a problematic. But I said 'hope' too because when we hold both aspects of the Christian proclamation together, resisting resolution one way or the other, then we find a reliable pattern and guide for our spiritual quest. Because the great Shepherd's desire is *also* to gather all the sheep at the banquet of the Kingdom – in the fulfilment, the completion, the new heaven and the new earth.⁶

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³ John 1:1-3

⁴ Revelation 7:14

⁵ Romans 7:15

⁶ Revelation 21:1