

Sermon for St. Peter De Beauvoir Town

Let us begin with the Good Shepherd – A well-known story. This story stars a shepherd, some sheep, a hired hand and a wolf. It could almost be mistaken for a simple children's tale with little to offer the adult reader. But we should not be misled by the apparent gentleness of this story. There is much to be learned if we are willing to wrestle with the text.

The hired hand provides security for the sheep. He is the muscle, with the power to protect. Yet, the hired hand, who does not own the sheep, flees in terror at the first sign of trouble. The hired hand has chosen to save himself, rather than the flock that he has been entrusted and employed to care for.

The Hired hand is not worthy of the title of Shepherd. He is presented as the protector of the sheep but when the wolf appears the hired hand is not up to the task. He cannot provide the security needed by the sheep. The Hired Hand has been revealed as a false power.

The Good Shepherd, another name for Jesus, is an entirely different person. When the wolf attacks he meets the threat head on, and is willing to lay down his life for his sheep. But this is not an act of defeat. The Shepherd is not too cowardly to attack the wolf or defend himself. He chooses instead to embrace the attack so that the Sheep he owns can be spared. The Good Shepherd has claimed the sheep (all who believe in him) as his own and is not prepared to give them up.

The Good Shepherd says 'I know my sheep, and my sheep know me'. The prophet Jeremiah writes, 'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew You'. The Father knows Jesus, just as Jesus knows the Father. Jesus is the bridge that allows us to be known by the Father through him. Jesus reveals that to be known is to be loved.

So generous is the love of Jesus that we learn his love is to extend beyond the Jews to include sheep from another pen, we can call these sheep the Gentiles. Yet, unlike the false, limited power of the hired hand we experience the very real power and unlimited love of Jesus.

'The sheep listen to my voice' is a very brief verse but we are reminded to step away from all distractions and to listen to the one who seeks to care for us.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that Jesus was 'Pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed'.

Jesus is loved by the Father because he laid down his life, for his sheep, only to take it up again. With great authority Jesus chose to submit to death and with the same authority Jesus chooses to take up his life again. The resurrected Jesus reveals his great power, even over death.

'Where O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting?' wrote Paul the apostle to the Church in Corinth. Just like the wolf, death presents itself as a great power, but Jesus has even greater power to conquer death itself.

The wolf in this story represents everything that separates us from the love of God. The wolf is our sin and it would scatter and devour us were it not for the intervention of Christ.

Our reading from Acts represents a parallel tale to our Good Shepherd reading. We learn that Peter and John have been arrested for healing a lame man. They are presented before the High Priest and his family, the Captain of the Temple, the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law. These were leaders of Jewish culture and religion collectively known as the Sanhedrin. Apart from the Roman occupiers they were the most powerful men in Jerusalem.

Yet, these powerful figures seek to question Peter, a humble fisherman, a labourer without rank in Jewish society and they ask him 'By what power or what name did you do this? The Sanhedrin really want to know by what authority have they healed this man? The Sadducees represented the largest part of the priesthood and they did not believe in the resurrection or that a Messiah would save the people. They interrogate Peter and John, not to learn and benefit from the source of this power, as they have already rejected Jesus. They seek to condemn Peter and John for healing in name of Jesus, an authority they chose to crucify.

This question from the Sanhedrin reveals that they are just as powerless as the hired hand. They present themselves as powerful people, yet their powers cannot compete or compare with the power given to Peter to heal. Their power is limited to condemning all who threaten their limited authority.

Just like the hired hand their power is brittle, limited and false. They cannot claim resurrection power. Their power is inferior when compared to Jesus.

Then Peter, full of the Holy Spirit reveals the source of his power 'It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed'.

This verse has two great revelations for us. The first is the power of resurrection granted by the Father to his Son to absolve us of our sins. The second revelation is that the power of resurrection is shared with all who follow Jesus. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, Peter was given the power to heal a lame man. His legs were as good as dead to him, but in the name of Jesus they were healed and given new life.

I want to encourage you, that just like Peter, you too can claim the resurrection power of healing in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Many of us take our identity from our place of work. Our employment gives us status, self-importance, respect and often authority over others. Yet during this pandemic, many have been furloughed and some made redundant. Even if we are spared these misfortunes, all of us will have to retire at some point. Any authority we may have taken from our employment is lost when our role is taken away from us. Any power or authority given to us in our employment is brief.

When we are young, we are full of adventure and energy. Our enthusiasm is boundless and we may set great challenges for ourselves. Yet as we get older, we recognise that our

physical strength and vigour begin to wane and we adjust our lifestyle to accommodate our reduced strength as we age. We recognise that our physical strength and power is also given for just a brief period.

During this pandemic many people have experienced grief. The loss of a close, much loved family member can shake our confidence and diminish our spirit as we are reminded of the fragility of life. Even if we devoted all of our energy, effort and resources into a much-valued, deeply loved relationship it cannot last forever. However, cherished our relationships are, they too, just like our employment and our health, will not last for ever.

The Good Shepherd brings us healing so that we do not have to live as a defeated and crushed people. Jesus died so that we could rely on his power and authority over every situation that we are faced with. The resurrection power of Jesus, shared with us, gives us hope that all is not lost.

When Peter healed the lame man in the name of Jesus, he demonstrated the power that is accessible to us if we accept him as our Good Shepherd and live as his sheep. His power can take authority over every situation in our life.

Whatever, tragedy or misfortune has fallen upon us, however hopeless our situation appears, we are instructed like Peter to call for resurrection and healing in the name of Jesus. Some, like the lame man will experience instant healing.

Some of us will have to wait until 'A new heaven and a new earth' is created as promised by the apostle John in the book of Revelations. In this new heaven and earth, God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

I encourage you to seek the Good Shepherd and his unlimited power of resurrection and healing into every part of your life that causes pain and hardship. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, may you be healed and freed from your pain.

Amen.