

MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 26 April 2009, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

2nd Sunday after Easter

preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff

hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)

Welcome & Intimations

Opening Hymn : 'Fairest Lord Jesus' (CH 463)

Children's Talk

Children's Hymn : 'All creatures of our God and king' (CH 147: 1, 3, 4, 7)

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

Readings : Micah 4:1-5 (*TaNaKH*) & John 21:15-19 (*New Jerusalem Bible*)

Hymn : 'Pray that Jerusalem may have' (CH 82)

Sermon

On a bright, sunshiny day a shepherd walks his flock through the hills. All of a sudden a big Jeep Cherokee comes along. A young urban professional jumps out. 'Hey shepherd,' he says, 'if I can tell you how many sheep you have, then can I have one?' 'Sure,' the shepherd says. So the young man sets up a table, gets his laptop out, installs a satellite dish, logs in to the NASA website, does a full area scan and before the shepherd can even finish eating his sandwich, the man prints off 20 pages of spreadsheets. 'You have got exactly 583 sheep around here,' he says. 'That's correct,' answers the shepherd. So the young man takes an animal and puts it in the boot of his Jeep. 'Now wait a minute,' the shepherd says, 'if I can tell you what kind of business your are in, can I have my animal back?' 'Sure,' says the young man. 'You are a consultant,' says the shepherd. 'How do you know?' asks the young man. 'Well, you came without anyone asking. You did a whole survey to tell me something I already know. And at the end of the day you know nothing about shepherding, since you just did not take a sheep, but my dog.'

Today I feel a bit like a consultant. I am about to tell you all about shepherding sheep, but I would not even know how to call a sheepdog.

And yet, the message John has handed down to us, is as clear as can be. Knowing that the Lord has risen, learning how death and destruction cannot defeat life, believing that the Lord is alive among us, what should we do? Since in the Bible words and deeds always go together, it is essential to know what to do. And John answers that question.

In the courtyard of the High Priest's house Peter has denied three times that he knew Jesus. Now Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. Then Jesus gives three answers which may look very similar, but actually are not. Each answer is a practical

guide in its own right.

Jesus tells Peter what to *do*. He does not ask Peter to believe in him or for any religious act, but to *do* something. Denying Christ is essentially about *not doing* what the Lord asks from us, rather than missing out on the correct creed or confession.

Jesus' three answers are:

feed my lambs –
shepherd my sheep –
*feed my sheep.*¹

(Unfortunately many translations are a bit sloppy, making the important nuances in the text invisible.)

Using a very practical example, straight from daily life in the rural area of Galilee, Jesus clearly directs Peter to be a good pastor for those relying on his guidance. And the nuances in the wording also provide a clear pattern for that pastoral care.

First Peter needs to *feed the lambs*. Meaning: he has to teach, guide and educate the new members of the congregation. In Peter's days that would always have been adults who had become followers of Jesus. Their conversion was not one big flash of light making everything clear all at once. They needed teaching and guidance to learn what it meant to follow Jesus in their every day life. Teaching is the first step of pastoral care. In our situation that would certainly include children and teenagers, but in fact we all need to keep learning throughout our whole life.

The second step Peter has to make is to *shepherd the sheep*. Once the lambs have learned to feed themselves, and not go astray, they cannot be left to themselves. Someone needs to look after them, giving support, holding them a mirror, involving them in the common life of the congregation, helping them to *do* the Word of God. In our situation this is a task for ministers and elders, but certainly just as much for each of us. Quite often we are indeed like sheep. If one decides to run left, the rest will follow, and if another suddenly turns right, they follow again. So, we can do with some mutual support and guidance to prevent us from becoming headless chickens. (I do apologise to the SSPCA for this remark.) Actually, this *shepherding of sheep* is equally applicable to secular and spiritual matters, and the church should be well aware of that.

The third step Peter has to make is to *feed the sheep*. When sheep get old, or very old, they may have difficulty in feeding themselves. They may have forgotten the things they once learned. Still they are fully part of the congregation and they deserve the same pastoral care as others. Again, this includes both secular and spiritual matters.

¹ In Greek: *bo,ske ta. avrni,a mou – poi,maine ta. pro,bata, mou – bo,ske ta. pro,bata, mou.* From the Greek verb 'poimainoo' came the (now outdated) Dutch word 'poimeniek', the academic discipline of pastoral care. Actually, the *New Jerusalem Bible* translates Jesus' second answer with 'look after my sheep', but 'shepherd my sheep', as the *New American Standard Bible* has it, reflects the alliteration of the Greek better.

A word about Peter's death. Tradition has it that Jesus is referring to Peter's future arrest and crucifixion. However, we know nothing about that except devout stories from that same tradition. Isn't Jesus simply telling Peter that he will grow old and in the end need others to *feed* and *shepherd* him? Wouldn't that be the time when *somebody else will put a belt round* him? That would bring things back into proportions we can recognise in our own lives.

For Peter the way to make right what he did wrong before, is to be a good and true pastor, a good shepherd like his Master. Saying that he loves Jesus means, that he faithfully does this work of teaching, guiding and supporting. As long as he, humanly speaking, can.

Now is that all? Is all we need to do just keeping our congregation going on together nicely?

Yes, that's all. Because, as we all know, it will take a whole lifetime to accomplish. And we also have learned that, if God is not present in our daily life, then where else could she be or how could others meet with him?

And no – that's *not* all. Because beyond this daily work of pastoral care there is this far wider vision of the prophets, like Micah. Ultimately the pastoral care we give to each other and to all who cross our path, is the way towards the Day of the Lord about which Micah speaks. It is the way to bring the nations – that is: those who do not belong to Israel, in short: all of us – to learn Torah. Learning Torah is to listen to the Word of God in order to do it. Once we learn Torah we will know the truth of the old playful slogan 'make love not war'. As well as the deep peace of sitting under your vine or fig tree.

As long as we still do make wars, and invest billions of pounds in new weapon systems, there still is a lot of *feeding* and *shepherding* to do. As long as we destroy vineyards and chop olive trees, as long as we destroy glens and vandalise city parks, we are sorely needed as good shepherds. Seen from the prophet's perspective our pastoral task is to reveal the deceitfulness of the gods of our world and lead people to the Name of the ONE God who will unite all.

The prophet's vision is the big picture behind our daily task of pastoral care. Teaching and learning, supporting and being supported we may happily work our way towards that great vision. And this great vision includes all of our life, from when we are young and still learning, until we are way beyond that.

A last question: does the church need consultants for that? Not if they fly in their programmes and gadgets for their own benefit. But since learning Torah is very much about what we do in daily life, why couldn't external advisers help us find new and fresh ways for that? Well, as long as they drive modest Vauxhalls and their laptops don't run Windows...

Amen.

Hymn : 'Sing for God's glory' (CH 172)

Offering brought forward

Prayer of Intercession

Closing Hymn : 'Be thou my vision' (CH 465)

Blessing