

Sermon for Sunday, April 17, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today is the Sunday
that is commonly referred to
as Good Shepherd Sunday.
It's the day
when we recite psalm 23,
and we read from the gospel of John,
when Jesus talks
about himself as the shepherd
and us as the sheep.
It's not the most flattering of images -
anyone
who has ever
spent any time with sheep
knows that they are not the most intelligent of animals;
they're known for being difficult to round up,
prone to dashing off
in some totally illogical direction,
And of course
where one goes
the rest enthusiastically follow.

My grandparents used to own
what is called in Australia
a sheep property,
thirty-three hundred acres of rough, rocky country
where they grazed a flock
of merino sheep.
No one lived there full time;
it was a place where the family could gather at Christmas
or vacation when school was out;
most of the rest of the time
the sheep were left to their own devices
except when they were rounded up for shearing or dipping - that's when they had to swim
along a trough with insecticide in it,
to prevent various parasites.

I have memories
of us kids running around
trying to keep them from bolting,
and getting our dog in among them.
She was an Old English Sheepdog,
and apparently the sheep thought she was a sheep
and once she was among them,
they would happily follow her.

But there was one sheep, Claude,
who was different.
Claude - who was actually a ewe -
had been bottle fed,
and knew us all.
And if you yelled out Claude's name
she would come running to be petted
and fed bread with marmalade.

The sheep in Jesus's time
and even now, in Palestine,
were more like Claude
than the rest of our sheep.

They are cared for in small flocks
by a shepherd,
who lives with them, sleeps beside them,
and knows them -
and they know
their shepherd's voice.

That's the image Jesus was thinking of
when he said,
"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

That's what fundamentally defines us as Christians.
That we hear Jesus' voice
and follow him.

I think it's that,
that the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, was referring to last week,

when he was faced with the news
that the person he had always thought of as his father
was not his genetic father at all.

Instead

it was someone he had met on occasion
but who really had no part in his life.

That sort of revelation
could fundamentally shake
your identity.

But he faced it calmly, saying,

“I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ, not in genetics, and my identity in him never
changes.”

Welby knows Jesus’ voice.

He is one of Jesus’
precious sheep.

And he has chosen
to follow him.

But what does it mean
to hear Jesus’ voice?

What does it mean
to follow him?

We often think of it
in terms of doing specific things.

Going to church.

Praying.

Serving.

But I think there’s more to it than that.

Those things
are only a beginning.

Jesus expects us

to listen to his voice
not just once

but each and every day, in everything
that we do.

In other words,

Jesus’ voice

becomes the criterion
by which we decide everything in our lives.

Or to use a phrase that was popular a few years ago,
we are to constantly ask ourselves, in every part of our life,
“What would Jesus do?”

I think that’s what our bishop was doing,
when he wrote a message this week
to the Diocese and Especially Immigrant Families
About Suffolk County Political Activity.
You may well have seen news reports about it.

In it
he expressed concern about the visit of Donald Trump
to Patchogue this week
for a Republican Party fundraiser.
The Bishop’s argument
was that this action was inappropriate and inflammatory
given the event was to be held
just up the street from where, in 2008,
Marcello Lucero and another man
were jumped by a group of seven kids who were out to harass immigrants.
Lucero fought back,
and in the ensuing scuffle,
he was stabbed,
and died soon afterwards
in the driveway
of a nearby house.

I love our bishop,
but sometimes he can be a little naive.
I suspect he thought
he was making a statement about what he,
as a follower of Jesus Christ,
has heard Jesus saying about reconciliation, and love, and peace.
And indeed, that was how his letter ended, with these words:

“In Jesus Christ we are all one body, brother and sisters of each other. United we will face
the ignorance of those who seek to divide us in fear. Together we will build bridges of
love and acceptance, not walls of fear and intolerance. Together we will seek to respect

and admire the differences that make us unique children of God and build a community in which all are seen as equal and all know the dignity that is incarnate in our humanity.”

Of course, what the media picked up
were earlier in his letter,
some undeniably political statements.
Statements which
are his interpretation
of how Jesus might have responded in this case.
Not everyone
agrees with him.

But where we can agree with our bishop,
as followers of Jesus Christ,
is that we need to listen to his voice
and act
accordingly.
And that our actions
should always involve prayer.

A day later,
our bishop issued an invitation to join him
in a vigil in Patchogue during Trump’s visit.
And so I went.
Not to make a political statement,
but to pray.

This was not a political rally.
We did not stand in front of the Emporium
or even on Main Street, where I think most of the protesters were.
We were there to pray.
That’s what the bishop reminded us of,
as we gathered at St Paul’s Episcopal Church
for twenty minutes or so of silence
punctuated by prayers
from the “Prayers and Thanksgivings” in our Book of Common Prayer
that begins on page 810.

We then walked over to the Congregational Church
led by our Episcopal flag,

and joined people there in another fifteen minutes of silent prayer,
in the place where Marcelo Lucero's funeral was held,

Then, after photographs with the police outside - one of whom
is Terrence Buckley. He's training for the priesthood in our diocese, and is a student in
my preaching class.

Then we walked down
to the place by the railway station
where Marcelo Lucero died.
And there we prayed.

The only signs carried by anyone in our group
were simple hearts,
offered to us
by a local community group
focussed on building community in Patchogue.

At one point,
a group of protestors arrived with anti-police signs.
They were quickly asked to leave.
We were not there to stir up controversy or hatred.
We were there to pray.

And so we prayed, and prayed some more,
and someone sang U2's song, "One."

One love
One blood
One life
You got to do what you should
One life
With each other
Sisters
Brothers
One life
But we're not the same
We get to carry each other
Carry each other

And then we placed candles
where Marcelo Lucero died.

And three things stand out for me about the afternoon.
One was the policewoman
who, because our vigil was so quiet,
spent close on half an hour talking with two five year olds.
They were of hispanic background,
and at first were shy and a little scared.
But as they talked, a mere 6 feet or so
from the place where Marcelo Lucero died,
the kids became animated,
and by the time the policewoman was called away
because our vigil was so calm,
and the protests up the road were heating up,
the two kids were confidently declaring
that they were going to join the police too.

That's what peace, that's what reconciliation
looks like.

The second is a conversation I had with another cop.
She told me about how important faith was in her unit.
There's Terrence, training for priesthood in the Episcopal Church,
and another one of her peers is an evangelical pastor.
She's what she described as "an ordinary Presbyterian,"
and as a result of a conversation with her,
another one of their team
has begun going to church,
seeking the peace that only God can give.

That's what peace, that's what reconciliation
looks like.

And the third
is what happened when we got back to St Paul's.
We'd just crossed the road in front of the church
when a group of kids came along -
youngish teenagers, black, white, hispanic,
carrying signs.

And they stopped,
and asked one of us
what our flag was about.
And we grabbed the bishop,
and he spend ten minutes talking with the kids
about the Episcopal Church,
and what we were doing there.

That's what peace, that's what reconciliation
looks like.

Our calling
is to listen for the voice of our Savior, Jesus Christ,
and to follow him.
Every hour, every day.
Whether it's in the context of shopping,
or work,
or political activity.
All of those
fall within the realm of faith.
All of those
are places
where we live out
our commitment to Jesus.

And this week,
as we have the New York primaries,
I encourage you to listen for Jesus' voice,
and vote accordingly.
If you are a Republican,
listen,
and vote.
If you are a Democrat,
listen, and vote.

Because we are Christ's sheep.
We know his voice.
So listen for it.
And act
accordingly.