Sermon: Easter 4B Good Shepherd and Vocation

On the rare occasions I get to control what is watched on the tele in the Vicarage I like to watch some of the ‘classic’ comedies. A favourite is *Allo! Allo!* In a lot of the episodes a resistance sympathiser enters the café, disguised as someone either lost or selling something, but on a mission to pass on a message or some equipment to René. Every time he thinks his disguise has fooled everyone, and so, as he reaches the bar he raises his glasses and says: “It is I… LeClair!” His identity is important. It conveys trust, integrity, and belonging. Much more than his official identity papers would. Our identities are also important. And there is more to us than can be simply garnered from our paperwork.

For instance, my Passport states that I am Michael Macey and I am British. It states a factual truth – or at least I hope it is a factual truth – that I belong to this nation, this community, and have a name. Your Passport will likewise provide similar information. But if I picked up your Passport and read through it, would I be able to say I know you? That I could trust you? I doubt it. If you looked through mine you would see quite a few visas, and entry and exit stamps as pre-children Emma and I liked to travel. You will discover where and when I was born. But there is no mention within my passport that I am married; father to 2 daughters, a Christian priest, a cricket fan and someone who likes cake and chocolate biscuits! My data in my Passport is important but it doesn’t give the full picture of who I really am, and neither will yours. Our identities are bound by so many differing factors that it would be impossible to list them all. Some of these we have created for ourselves. Some have been given to us. But as Christians there is one uniting factor: We all believe in, and follow, God who has revealed himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Since Easter we have been basking in the Glory of the Risen Christ and, through his first disciples and the pages of Holy Scripture, we have been trying to fully understand who the Risen Christ really is. We have seen doubt, fear, and confusion in the lives of the disciples but also joy, faith, and confidence as they slowly come to grips with Christ’s new identity and reality. Our Gospel reading today, although set before Jesus’ death and resurrection, helps shed some light on who Jesus Christ really is. And although we didn’t hear the question “Who are you?” it is there. It is implicit in the text but can also be found at the end of chapter 9 from which this assertion flows. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd; the one who knows his sheep – wherever they may be – and who will protect them whatever the cost, even to the point of death. In this passage we see Jesus as both a caring figure and an authority figure. Caring for he leads, nurtures, and tends his sheep. Caring for he protects, defends, and searches for his sheep. Caring for he knows his sheep, loves them, and seeks the best for them. As an authority figure he calls his sheep and they respond for they know his voice, he leads and guides them to pasture and they follow, and he makes decisions on their behalf and they accept.

Christ is giving himself, or at least naming and showing us, the identity of the Good Shepherd with all the related imagery and ideology that goes with it because he thinks using a common day example will help people to understand who he really is. From our non-farming perspective it is a slightly baffling analogy. I for one have gone into a field and tried to call the sheep and it failed miserably. But then of course it would do as I am not their shepherd. All who belong to God through Jesus Christ will hear his voice. The assumption in this passage is that upon hearing we will respond positively and follow Christ. But as we all know that is not always the case. The number of times I have to remind Sophie to use her ‘listening ears’ when I am trying to speak with her is excruciating. Or when I know Abbie has heard something I have said but then gives a cheeky grin and goes and does the complete opposite. We all have this tendency – of not really listening or choosing to ignore. But then we can also listen. We can listen and respond appropriately when we want.

Jesus, in his teaching to the Pharisees, assumes that whoever chooses to accept him, the Good Shepherd, will also choose to listen to his voice and therefore follow him. That same assumption is held within the Church today. We, your priests, assume that you have chosen to listen to Jesus; that you have been attracted by his message of love and forgiveness, and by his call on your lives to follow him. We assume that in the risen Christ, you have put to death your old-self and have been born anew, through baptism, and have a new identity in him. We assume that you will be attentive in prayer so as to be able to hear Christ’s call upon your lives and so that you may be able to discern what he might be asking you to do with the gifts he has given you.

So what do you think Jesus is asking you to do as you try to follow him? Have you found your vocation in life? Is your work fulfilling and making the most of your gifts? If you are retired, what might God be asking you to do, even though your lives are now busier than when you were working?! What might you be able to do in response to God’s overwhelming love for us shown on the cross and the empty tomb? It might be that you are a keen gardener – perhaps you could help someone with theirs or come and help keep the church grounds well groomed. It might be you are a good talker and listener – perhaps you could visit people who are lonely of sick in the name of the Church when Covid-restrictions allow? It might be that you want to make Christ known to other people – have you ever thought about becoming a priest or a lay-reader? It might be you have a lovely singing voice – have you thought about using that gift for the glory of God and joining the choir when we can sing in church again?

There are so many gifts and so many ways to respond to Jesus’ call on our lives. We each need to discern what is the appropriate response. In Christ we have a new identity – do we live and love like we have? Or are we carrying on regardless?

General Kitchener during WWI once famously said “Your country needs you.” The same is true of God and his Church: “Your Church needs you”.