

12th May 2019 - Easter IV

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: 11 Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty
 747 Give me the wings of faith to rise
 Halle, halle, hallelujah!
 736 In heavenly love abiding
 294 All you that seek the Lord who died

Readings: Acts 9:35-43
 Psalm 23
 Revelation 7:9-17
 John 10:22-30

“The Lamb who is shepherd”

Let us pray: may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord our strength, and our redeemer.

So who are these among whom we are gathered, robed in white, and where have they come from?

That’s what the elder in the reading from the Revelation asked the evangelist.

Who are these among whom we are gathered, robed in dresses, and denim, and cotton T shirts, and tweed and rayon of a glorious variety of colours?

Answering his own question, ‘These are the ones who have come out of the great ordeal,’ said the elder, ‘they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.’

These are the ones who have a lamb for a shepherd.

Friends, you look beautiful today, in your denim, and cotton, and wool and tweed and rayon. And make no mistake, as you gather and greet one another and pray, and say the ancient word AMEN, we come into the presence of the Lord.

We are still in the Easter season, in which the scriptures ask us to consider eternal things. Heaven, and the eternal life in which we are

already begun, and the sweep of salvation history. What it means to say God is with us.

And so we heard the story from the Acts of the Apostles, where Luke tells us of Peter in Joppa, bringing Dorcas, or Tabitha, back to life – and Psalm 23, and Jesus challenged to declare himself Messiah in the Gospel, speaking in riddles about shepherds and sheep. And the Revelation, John's dream language about heaven. And this paradoxical proclamation that the lamb shall be the shepherd. Lambs don't make good shepherds, not in the real world?

And there is mystery, and utter self-contradicting paradox: washed in the blood of the lamb and made clean? Friends this is right up there with the stone the builders rejected being the corner stone – blood does not clean, it stains. It spreads. Even accounting for the traditions of ritual purification and Jesus' self-sacrifice to which this alludes, this is a paradoxical image.

At times in our Christian history the image of the blood has been used in ways that get ridiculous: one of the early English speaking 17th century proponents of Religious freedom, Roger Williams, wrote a 1644 best seller called the 'bloody tenant of persecution' in which he condemned the practice of any state enforced religion.

His point is still apt today. But he had an opponent, John Cotton, who responded with a longer book called 'The bloody tenant washed clean in the blood of the lamb,' defending state enforcement of correct religion. TO which Williams responded with an even longer tome, 'The bloody tenant made yet more bloody by Mr Cotton's attempt to wash it in the blood of the lamb.' Page turners, all of them.

Mystery, which is what this phrase the blood of the lamb is about, and what the lamb as shepherd is about – mystery reduced ethics, quickly becomes ridiculous. That is when you take a mystery like the lamb as shepherd and try to make a bullet point policy out of it, you end up with something less than Jesus is.

And yet there it is, washed in the blood of the lamb, we are changed and made clean. There are outcomes, somehow we participate, we who are gathered, we who are loved which is all of us, in this cleansing. Gathered in our denim, and rayon, and the rest.

What I love here is that in the midst of this massive mysterious sense of God in history – the lamb on the throne, the four beasts and the trumpets and smoke and all, we have an entirely down to earth promise.

God will wipe every tear from your eyes. You will not be hungry, you will not be thirsty. You won't get sunburn, and you will be guided to springs of the water of life by the lamb who is their shepherd.

The Gospel is entirely down to earth, in its mystery – this is what it is to have a lamb who is our shepherd to lead us to the springs of living water. God's peace, shalom, is about real peace. Not the thought of peace, or peace for those who had enough food already, or peace for those who already live in a place with good legal systems and no corruption (at least not the kind that we name as corruption), and repeat prescriptions, and all the rest.

Turn and consider Dorcas, that widow who had died, whose story we heard in the reading from the Acts. Because when Peter arrived, all the other widows were there grieving, giving witness to the earthy stuff, the robes and tunics she had made for all those who had need – witness to the food she had served, the people she had cared for.

Not for nothing were there 'Dorcas clubs' all up and down in Methodism in this country, where women organised to do the good work the Gospel good news work, the lamb who is shepherd work, while the ministers and trustees were having their church committee meetings and musing over doctrine and worrying on the esoteric issues of the day.

There is no denigration of those of us who sit on the committees and formulate doctrine, and argue over issues of political and economic import – but the Gospel is more mysterious, and more practical. Down to earth. Even and especially at the heart of the dream scape which is the Revelation.

SO my one challenge to us today, as we move ever deeper into the Easter season, with the lamb as our shepherd, is this. Do not shy from mystery in our faith. From the thing which does not fit, the bizarre backward economics of a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to go after one, the unexplained and unexplainable. Mystery is always counter intuitive. Always dislocating, almost never giving a good strap line or three point plan.

And, as we do not shy from mystery, neither forget the real down to earth promises at its heart:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. These are words said by someone I suspect who knows what it is to want.

He leads me by green pastures, and still waters. This is said by someone who knows about walking over stones.

The widows who gathered over Dorcas' body knew just how important her service and care had been – they knew who would be naked without the robes she had sewn, or hungry without her food.

When breath returns to her body, it is not just her body that is restored, but her vocation. Dorcas did not presumably go on to live forever, her raising is, in the Acts of the Apostles simply a sign a foretaste of the heaven which is already among us. And this is not just one woman, but a community reborn, having gone through the ordeal of her death, living in a foretaste of the promise of the Revelation.

Easter season is a time when we speak of heaven. Not just as a place or a time after death, but as the promise of eternal life, of a life for our world beyond death, which is begun now.

Heaven is hard to pin down, it doesn't make sense, it is not rational – it has a topsy turvy justice and logic in which a lamb becomes a shepherd, and the people who have nothing are suddenly rich. Where a Messiah has no need to declare himself to those who would make an examination of him as he walks in the temple, because, as he says, 'My sheep already know my voice.'

Who are the lambs among us today? And where might they lead if they were shepherds?

The theologian Jean Vanier died this past week, with little fanfare. He was someone who moved by the lives of learning disabled adults, revolutionised care for them. Such that their carers always moved at their pace, loved and respected their routines and learned love at their feet. TO be loved not for what we might succeed at, nor for competence, nor anything we own nor what we look like, but simply for who we are alongside someone else in loving actions of practical care. He said, 'we are called not to do extraordinary things, but to do ordinary things with extraordinary love.'

God's love. The love of the shepherd for the sheep, the lamb who is the shepherd who refuses to be separated from the least of the sheep. Who gives even the power of the shepherd's crook to run close to the ground with the newest of the flock.

Jean Vanier lived as a lamb with the lambs, some of whom were the adults cared for, and some of whom were the carers, and let the lamb among them be the shepherd.

Some said he wasted his time, when he could have been writing and speaking – but the pictures of him look a man who was utterly content, utterly satisfied – like a man who had received the promises of the Revelation. Comfort, food, drink, shelter. And had offered it to others.

The lamb Jesus as shepherd leads us, all of us, to enough food. And to water and shade.

And more than that, to joy – don't forget the first thing we about heaven is joy! We are made to be a part of the shout of praise which rises in heaven from those who have been through the ordeal, 'Amen,' or so be it. This is a shout of joy that comes from people without any prompt – dare I say, like the euphoria of a Liverpool fan – a shout that leaps out of our bodies bypassing our minds entirely!

Today, consider this mystery, which is Easter. And dwell in the love of God which re-orders our world. Full on eternal life, the praise and adoration of the sovereign Lord, and the down to earth promise of food, shelter, water, love.

My sheep know my voice, said Jesus. Who are these gathered in their robes of denim, of cotton and wool and rayon and every other fabric in such glorious splendour among us? These are the sheep of his fold, the one who have come through the great ordeal, gathered in the presence of the Lord and who say together and for the world, AMEN.