

Sermon Easter 4 Year B 2018

When our bodies begin to fail, when they do not cooperate with us in the way we might hope, who do we turn to for help? When there are unusual aches and pains, when things just don't seem right with our bodies, whose voice, whose opinion do we trust? You might have heard of 'Dr Google'. For many people today, their first port of call when things start going wrong is to consult the internet and to try and diagnose themselves. I've done it myself... But it's a tricky business. It's hard to sift through all the information, to discern which of the many *competing* voices to listen to and take notice of. There's no authority overseeing what goes up on the internet. It becomes a forum for every quack and crackpot. Every voice is equal, even if wrong. Not many of us are experts in medicine, but we trust that our doctors are. When things go wrong with our bodies we ought to turn to our doctors in the trust - and hope - that they will know what to do. If we wish to have our failing bodies healed or our conditions managed, then we need to listen to what they have to say. We trust their voice. We trust their expertise. We have faith in what they say.

The charge of *blind faith* is of course frequently directed against *people* of faith. It is often levelled against us as a way of dismissing people of faith as a conversation partner. To say we suffer from blind faith implies a level of stupidity, ignorance. Empirical evidence and reason is what we should be listening to! You would be aware how in the culture we now inhabit how quickly a legitimate opinion drawn from a position of faith is howled down. But this is simply a mark of illiberal liberalism. The trendy lefties are supposedly tolerant of all stances and opinions *expect* those that disagree with and challenge their agenda. And we see the most clearly in the silencing of religious - especially Christian - voices in this country.

But we don't always make it easy for ourselves. Christians can come up with some pretty stupid, ignorant and misinformed statements. And worse, some pretty stupid, ignorant, misinformed actions. Some religious leaders *insist* on blind faith: uncritical, unquestioning, naïve faith. So often this can have tragic, deadly consequences. '*God told me to!*' can be the cry.

It's a hard statement to argue with: If God says, well, better obey! But it's how cult leaders lead poor souls into suicide pacts. Or how abusive clergymen can keep their victims silent and disempowered for so long. And each sorry story and each scandalous incident from these bad shepherds, these hirelings, these wolves in sheep's clothing, chip away at the church's fragile credibility. For the rest of us sincere believers - for critical, questioning believers, for those with a robust faith - it can be hard to counter the charge of blind faith.

In the context we face today, the conviction of some that 'God told me to' is having chilling and catastrophic events. The young, fired up, well-resourced fighters of ISIS are going around the Middle East, beheading, shooting, pushing people off towers, demolishing historical and cultural heritage, destroying entire communities. And they do so because they believe in all sincerity that 'God told them to.' They do so out of deep religious conviction. Don't believe for a moment the narrative that it's inauthentic to Islam. It's *completely* congruent with that faith as seen its *entire* history. But we are becoming increasingly aware that such actions and movements are not limited to borders far away. Their diabolical attacks – and attempted attacks, even on our own shores, even in this city - have shown their wide reach. Their world view, their warped understanding of God is closer than we would care to admit even if the blind faith which says, 'God told me to' *does* seem like a world away.

It remains though, that as people of faith, we will want to hold onto the idea that God does indeed seek to communicate his mind and will to us; that there is a voice we can hear and trust. The Christians spiritual tradition speaks of discernment; of judging the spirits; of reading the signs of the times; of hearing the voice of God. We might be nervous about the bold and dangerous claims some make when saying, 'God told me.' But as people of faith we will want to keep on saying that we *can hear* God speak to us. We *can trust* what he might be saying to us here and now. Christ *invites* us to listen to him. He doesn't force us to. We are not obliged to listen to him. It remains a choice. But certainly - as it is presented to us in the gospel today - a choice worth considering and worth taking seriously.

The image of Christ as the good shepherd was certainly formative for the early Christian community. It is one of the most popular and attractive of the images of Jesus found in the Gospels. And if we ask the question *who will I listen to, who will I trust?* we can answer, *well, those whom we know to be good, those who prove themselves by the quality of their lives, those who have the best interest of others at heart.* Surely, this is what we see in Christ: *I know my own and mine know me...I lay down my life for the sheep.* For those of us who see *the good* that the good shepherd wishes for his flock, then, as the gospel tells us, *listen to his voice.*

We can trust his voice, trust where the shepherd leads, because he wishes for us our good. While this might be fine in a *general* sense, it can leave our commitment and trust in Christ somewhat remote. Part of the appeal of the fanatics proclaiming ‘God told me’ is that it impacts people here and now, makes demands here and now, shapes and changes and challenges our life here and now. So how do we cut through the competing and distracting (and sometimes false) voices claiming to speak for God, to a sincere, truthful, authentic voice of God? How do we know we can trust it?

As Easter people charged with living Easter faith the answer is really quite simple. In seeking a voice to listen to and trust we ask the question, *does it lead to life?* It is life - indeed *abundance* of life - which is the benchmark, the measure by which we judge the competing claims on our lives and loyalties? In the thousand and one choices and decisions we must make, as we seek to discern which path to take, which option is better, which voice to listen to, we can ask, *will this uphold life? Will this further life? Will this give dignity to life? Will this lead to life?* Or will it destroy life? Diminish life? Compromise life? In the mess and complexity and challenge of life what will lead us forward? The light of life: Christ, our Risen Lord, leads us to life. The one, who *lays down his life, takes it up again.* And he takes it up to lead us into that life. Who will we trust? Who will we listen to? To the voice and the One who leads us to life. Amen.