

## **SERMON: 3 May 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **Reading: Ezekiel 34:7-16a**

Ezekiel was a young man (26) when he went into exile in Babylon.

It took about 4 years of exile before he starts receiving visions from God.

He described it as seeing the heavens opened to him.

8 years later!

In the 12th year of their exile (33:21),

Ezekiel gets a message that Jerusalem has finally fallen and the whole place is in ruins, including the great temple built by king Solomon.

The whole place was in ruins - physically and spiritually.

The ancient religion of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had become a sham.

Religious leadership was self serving, and only looked after themselves.

And as a result, people were like sheep without a shepherd, scattered, lost, wandered.

The weak were not cared for.

The sick were not attended to.

The broken were not bound up.

The lost were left - to be permanently lost.

Israel was awash with murder, idolatry, adultery and abuse of power.

So much for the religion that was supposed to bring light and life to all humanity.

Rotten.

To the core.

Useless.

Worse than useless.

Harmful even.

Surely that could never happen again?

The visions Ezekiel received from the Lord God were all to do with how this situation would not be allowed to continue.

It had to be shut down and rebuilt from scratch.

There needed to be a sea change in people's hearts.

There needed to be a new kind of role model to follow.

There needed to be better leadership, honest and just;

caring of the weak and compassionate for the wandered.

And so there emerges the vision of a Good Shepherd which would not be realised through the next 35 years of exile

nor indeed through the next 560 or so years until the Good Shepherd appeared in human form.

That's a long time to be without a shepherd.

And we think things are bad after 5 weeks of lockdown.

There is a great lesson here for religious leadership.

That no one should be left behind.

That the weak must be cared for as part of any religious project.

That the sick must be tended in any compassionate organisation.

That the broken must be bound up, made whole if society is to prosper.

And that the lost and wandered must be sought after because they matter as much as those who are already in the fold.

As long as one is missing, everyone is impoverished.

Hence the Good Shepherd leaves the 99 to seek the one that is lost.

- Reading John 10:1-10

The Lord is my shepherd.

He knows my name.

I know his voice and he knows mine.

He lays down his life for me.

What then can I do?

But to enter in through the Gate

and having done that,

To find my salvation in green pastures and abundant life.

And to follow THIS shepherd wherever that leads.

Sometimes that means going through dark times.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
or in the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil,  
I will not be afraid,  
for you Lord, are with me,  
your rod and your staff they comfort me.

The Lord leads us through whatever darkness we encounter.

And even in the darkness there is a purpose.

We discover new things in darkness.

We are forced to rely on resources we never new we had.

Even when we've reached breaking point and think we can't take any more  
any longer,

We can discover new depths underneath our pain.

Because God in Christ has been through every suffering imaginable.

And goes through it with us still.

When we've stopped relying on our own paltry efforts to keep control of  
everything,

We can begin to discover new ways of being in the world.

In the dark times when it feels like we are making no progress whatsoever,

Maybe all we can do is stop and be still,

And let the darkness be our teacher knowing that we are being led by the one for whom even darkness is as light.

If I say, surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me

Even the darkness will not be dark to you

The night will shine like the day

For the darkness is as light to you.

Psalm 139:11-12

Often, it's not until we emerge from the darkness that we see that it has taught us and that we have been guided by a faithful shepherd,

Who has now equipped us to live differently in the world,

To live with deeper compassion

To understand things more fully

To experience what other people have experienced or will go through in their own journey

And most of all, to love and to recognise the voice of the shepherd more and more clearly.

The 19th century Edinburgh minister, Horatiusp Bonar wrote some 600 hymns - where on earth did he find the time?

Like many of us he and his wife Jane, knew their share of dark times. Five of their young children died in succession.

Bonar wrote a hymn called:

I was a wand'ring sheep

I did not love the fold

I did not love my Shepherd's voice

I would not be controlled

I was a wayward child

I did not love my home

I did not love my Father's voice

I loved afar to roam.

Perhaps his greatest hymn is,

I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
come unto me and rest;

lay down thou weary one lay down;  
Thy head upon my breast.

I came to Jesus as I was,  
So weary, worn and sad;  
I found in him a resting place  
And he has made me glad.

May we know that rest today wherever we are in our journey.

And may we know that goodness and love will follow us all the days of our  
lives,  
As we entrust our past, present and future into the care of our Good  
Shepherd.

It's time to come home.  
It's time to return to the fold.  
It's time to realise that goodness and love have been chasing after you all  
along.  
It's time for the weak to find strength in the fold  
The sick to find their healing  
The broken to have their brokenness bound up  
And the lost to be found  
And earth and heaven to rejoice in the goodness of God.

Blessing:

Risen Christ,  
You are both Lamb and Shepherd.  
Equip us to follow in the way you have shown us;  
And give our lives in love for you and for one another;  
Until your kingdom comes at last.

The blessing of God be with us all  
now and forever.  
Amen.