

Sunday Thought

8th May 2022 Fourth Sunday of Easter

Readings

Acts 9: 36 - 43
Psalm 23
Revelation 7: 9 - 17
John 10: 23 - 30

Infectious Faith

Joppa was among the earliest Christian communities outside of Jerusalem. With one of the oldest harbours in the world, it had suffered destruction, oppression, and persecution, not dissimilar to what we are hearing about in Ukraine now, though the weaponry differed. Joppa



was Jerusalem's seaport but had declined as such following Herod the Great's unpopularity in the city, leading to his building of a new seaport forty miles north at Caesarea soon after Jesus was born. When Peter arrived there, Joppa had restored much of its characteristic features of fine buildings, beautiful gardens, and spectacular sandy beaches, plus its renowned craft industries in metal, wood and leather.

Our story from the Acts of the Apostles today featuring Tabitha's amazing healing by Jesus through Peter, gives insight to the early faith community which had been established in Joppa. Tabitha had become a social worker/deacon among the 'believers'. They were mostly a group of Jews who believed in Jesus as being the Christ, God's Son, the world's Saviour, and theirs, who had set them on a whole new way of life. I wonder how Tabitha became a believer. Obviously because she had met another believer – maybe a passing international pilgrim returning home by sea from Passover in Jerusalem, or just a friend of a friend sharing their faith experience. The Way of Jesus was expanding rapidly through faith infection. It was soon to become pandemic!

A similar theme can be found in the other scriptures for today although the image changes to have us thinking about sheep and their shepherd. In Joppa then, it could be said that the shepherd had come, and the sheep were following, one by one, or even in small groups as the gospel message was shared. Trusting Jesus, like sheep with the shepherd, they followed.

The reading from John's Revelation continues last week's picture of heaven and the enormous crowd - so big it is beyond counting. It comprises people of all races, tribes, nations, languages, standing before the throne of God and Jesus.

Their white robes suggest lives made pure through the life and death of Jesus and the palm branches they hold speak of resurrection victory and new life. The passage has a close reference to the shepherd psalm (23) when John is told that *these are the people who have been through the valley of the shadow of death, have been made clean by the sacrifice of Jesus; constantly know his divine protection and the care of his rod and staff; having all their needs supplied by him - life-giving water, fresh pastures and the shepherd's healing word and touch.* They are 'believers' who want to give him praise and honour and glory because they belong to God – the one shepherd – for ever! I note there is nothing there about church members, leaders, or sub-shepherds. There may be many different breeds, but only one shepherd!

In the Gospel reading Jesus assumes the role of shepherd with his followers as the sheep who have caught this infectious faith. He was in the Temple for Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights which celebrates the rededication of the Temple following its destruction and desecration in war with Syria. Jesus was walking in the cloisters at the east side of the Temple called *Solomon's Porch*, with a small group of enquirers who were in earnest to know when he would declare himself as the Christ and bring real freedom from the Roman tyranny. His answer is very simply, *'When you believe! When you catch faith in me!' and follow me as sheep follow a shepherd. When you listen to what I say. When you believe that God the Father and I are one; that what I say is what he is telling you; that my disciples are following him; my cross is about his eternal love-ache for all people, and my resurrection offers a share in his life and glory.*

Jesus is saying, *everything you need to know and do is here – in me. Become a believer!* The apostle Paul echoed Jesus words when he wrote to Christians at Philippi [3:10-12] *'All I want (or need) is to know Christ and the power of his living presence.'*

A Prayer (with Psalm 23 in mind)

Lord Jesus Christ, it's humbling to think of myself as a sheep, when some people think of them as silly animals!

Yet, it's worth it to know that following and believing you, is to trust God and know:



I shall never lack anything
I shall always have your spiritual nourishment;
I shall be renewed in heart and mind in your presence;
You will always guide me in the right way
prodding me on with your rod
or holding me back with your staff;
You will guard, protect, heal and comfort me even in
the darkest and most fearful moments of my life;
You will never stop loving me – ever,
and you will have a place in your fold for me
when time in the pasture comes to an end.

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