

Easter 4B – 3/5/09 St Aidan's and Wesley
Lay Pastor Elizabeth Richardson

John 10:11-18
Acts 4:5-12

In a calendar for this year, Michael Leunig has a cartoon showing a hill with the crucifixion scene. There are three crosses on top of the hill each with a man hanging on it. Below and in the foreground are two Roman soldiers talking. One points to the crosses and says to the other "Look at that! Brilliant! You kill the leader and you nip the whole movement in the bud".

Probably the religious leaders also thought that. Here in the Acts story are Annas and Caiaphas once more facing the apostles they've taken prisoner. We last heard of them as the chief priests who had Jesus arrested and who first interrogated Jesus.

This time it is well after the resurrection and Peter and John have healed a crippled man and preached to crowds of people. The temple guards arrested them and the next morning they were brought before Annas and Caiaphas who asked by what power the men healed and taught. Peter said that it was the power of Jesus. Annas and Caiaphas must have thought that Jesus had come back to haunt them! And far from nipping the movement in the bud, the death and resurrection of Jesus had started a movement that has spread across the world.

But just what was that power? One aspect of the power of Jesus is summed up in his saying:
I am the good shepherd, I know my own and my own know me (Jn 10:14).

Knowing someone is quite different to knowing about them. Sometimes celebrities report that strangers will greet them as though they were good friends only because they have been seen on TV frequently. People follow the lives of their favourite celebrities through the various magazines available and think they are getting to know them. That is not knowing the real person.

Can a teacher really teach without knowing the students? Think of those most important early years of school and remember back to your own. When I look back, I see that the teachers who took the trouble to really understand us children were the ones who taught us the most. They were the ones who knew that we were each individuals, each with slightly different ways of learning. They were the ones who could touch our hearts and inspire us.

Imagine that you have been struck down by an illness that leaves you conscious but unable to communicate properly. You are in hospital and the medical staff are all strangers to you. However dedicated the care they give it will not be the same as if they really knew you. A family member may visit and what a difference that can make. They know that you don't like the music that is playing. They know that you love to see trees and that being in that inner cubicle is life destroying to you. They know the sort of food you like to

eat and how you have your tea. Knowing another person is much more than knowing about them. Knowing helps us to empathise with another – to get inside their skin.

Jesus was the good shepherd who knew his own. A good shepherd would know the sort of grass that was best for the sheep, would know when they liked to rest and when to move on. A good shepherd would know the sheep which were more adventurous and apt to stray as much as he would know the ones which stayed close by. A good shepherd would know those sheep which would get into fights and those which needed to be protected. In the same way, Jesus knew and still does know his followers. Jesus understands us and our strengths and weaknesses, our likes and dislikes. He can do this because he really knows us inside out. He knows us intimately.

Think of the various stories of Jesus' contact with others. Jesus knew and loved the rich young ruler who was unable to give up his wealthy lifestyle to follow Jesus. Jesus understood the way life could be so tough for widows in that society. Jesus understood Peter and why he would hot headedly cut off the ear of a soldier trying to arrest Jesus but then deny all friendship with Jesus a short time later.

By New Testament times, Israel was a largely agricultural country rather than a pastoral one but there was a sense of yearning for the older pastoral times. Town people still liked the images of themselves as a semi nomadic people moving their flocks of sheep around. So the use of the metaphor shepherd was readily understood. Jesus was like a good shepherd.

Jesus said that his own knew him. Jesus understood the life of the Samaritan woman at the well and it was because he understood her, that she, in turn, was prepared to follow him and come to know him.

The Indian Jesuit, Anthony de Mello, says (*Contact with God*, ch 15) that it is not possible to follow Christ without first coming to know and love him. There is a progression. First we know Christ. Then as we get to know him our love for him grows. And then we are able to follow him. But in order to know Christ we have to meet him. This is not an intellectual knowledge of the man Jesus. It comes from meeting Jesus with open hearts and being open to letting him into our lives.

Anthony de Mello tells the story of how Mahatma Gandhi had followed the principles of the Sermon on the Mount but could not accept Jesus as the Son of God. An evangelist wrote to Gandhi wanting to encourage Gandhi to meet the man Jesus rather than the sermon. Gandhi replied that he realised that he could not grasp the position by the intellect but that his heart must be touched.

Jesus was the good shepherd. He wasn't just a competent leader but one whom people wanted to follow. The word for good also carried the idea of being honourable, honest, fine or beautiful. In other words, Jesus was the sort of attractive personality whom everyone wanted to get to know and love.

But even more, Jesus said “I am the good shepherd” It is that use of “I am” that tells us that he is once more identified with God. God had referred to himself as “I am”. What is more, God was known as the shepherd of his people and so was Jesus. Jesus and God are one. When we follow Jesus we follow God.

That has always been true, just as it has always been the case that some people come to believe in Jesus and find him such a wonderful person that they want to love him and follow in the way he taught.

That way includes knowing and caring for other people. Being a good shepherd. For Jesus, it was a way, not of keeping to a myriad of strict rules but of loving God and loving other people and then doing what that love entailed. That means a different way of living to the way of most of contemporary society. Instead of putting our achievements or the accumulation of wealth or how we appear in the eyes of others as of prime importance in our lives, we put knowing and loving God and our neighbours.

In our faith it means a lot more than learning about the Bible and what scholars have said about Christianity. It means being open to meeting God and coming to know and love God and then, because we love God we must truly meet and come to know other people, love them and care for them. This is truly knowing – not knowing about. This is a knowing available to all of us if we are prepared to open our hearts and meet God and our neighbour.

A person can be a wonderful clever Biblical scholar without having a heart open to God. Or a person could be someone who can quote biblical texts in any given situation. They can be quite ready to judge others saying ‘you shouldn’t do this because the Bible says’. And yet fail to be open to truly knowing God and neighbours. Now, I’m not saying that we shouldn’t study the Bible or the writings of scholars. That is important but that comes second after we know God. In the same way, we should make the most of the talents we have. We should do the best we can with our gifts and talents and then use those gifts and talents to serve God.

Christianity is a faith of opening the heart to knowing God - truly deeply knowing God and knowing other people and caring for other people in love because of that knowledge of God. That love and knowledge of others and caring is what has attracted people to Christianity. Far from nipping the movement in the bud, the crucifixion and resurrection were the start of a world wide movement.

Great things can be achieved when people get to know and love Jesus and then follow in his steps. When we know and love Jesus then we know God also. We are open to allow God into our hearts and we will want to do all that God wants us to do. Amen.