Have you ever disappointed a dog?

I have – one of the most disappointed looks I have ever received was from a sheep dog high up on a moor in the Scottish highlands.

Let me explain:

A few years ago we went to stay with a friend of ours who is both professional tuba player and hill shepherd. He had to work on one of the days we were there and so I went with him and another shepherd to help round up some sheep so they could be moved to new pasture. By late morning, we had nearly all of the sheep together but he and I were asked to look for some stragglers. We found six or seven of them easily enough but then spotted another couple much further up the hill.’ Look after that lot’ said my friend ‘while I go and get the others’. And off he went, with the sheepdog. So there was me, with my seven sheep and the task of keeping them together. Well that worked for about 30 seconds! But then, one by one, they wandered off; all my shouting and running around just made things worse. Up the hill they trotted and out of sight.

A few minutes later, my friend and the dog came back with the sheep they had gone to get and looked around for the one’s I was supposed to be looking after. And that’s when I got the deeply disappointed look from the dog. And off he ran, found the missing sheep and brought them back. And so ended my brief career as a shepherd.

As that little tale shows, the sheep didn’t know my voice. As long as a shepherd they recognised was there, they knew and listened to his voice –
calmness and order followed. They knew the shepherd and obeyed him – but they soon spotted an interloper.

Sheep get to know the shepherd’s voice; hearing brings comfort and anticipation of care; when the shepherd speaks, they obey.

Well, that’s OK for sheep but how far is the analogy to be pushed for those who claim to follow the good shepherd? Do we actively listen for the words the Lord is speaking to us or are they getting lost - drowned out by the media torrent which constantly assails us?

And how good are we at spotting imposters when they come along with their beguiling stories? I suspect the answer for most of us is that we are not as good as we could be at listening to the Lord.

Why?

Probably, if we are being wholly honest, lack of practice. So, is it time to practice intentionally listening to the Lord for ourselves, our families, our Cathedral, our city?

As we listen, we will become attuned to the Lord speaking – perhaps directly but often through scripture, through the words of others, through the beauty of creation, through strong impressions.

And, of course, part of the discipline in listening for the voice of the Lord is to weigh what we hear with others.
For some of us, this active listening will be the start of a journey which we have not been on before. For others, it will feel like the re-engagement with something set down long ago, for others, it will be a continuation of a familiar, everyday walk with the Lord.

Talk of walking with the Lord brings with it a sense of movement and purpose. Living lives devoted to the Good Shepherd means committing to journey with him. A little later in our service, the choir will sing the words of Psalm 23 – the Lord is my Shepherd. Have you noticed that it is a psalm full of the activity of the Lord:

providing; leading; restoring, guiding; accompanying; comforting; preparing; anointing?

God is not passive but a God who is active drawing us on with him – deeper and deeper into his love.

We are called on a journey. It is not an A to B sort of journey but an invitation to visit different aspects of our lives with the Lord to see how they can be fully brought under the rule and reign of Jesus.

As you will know from reading the annual report, the organisation of the Cathedral is grouped around four themes – welcome, worship, reconciliation and resource each headed by a Canon.

As well as being ways of organising who does what, they are also four aspects of discipleship we can visit with Lord.
The first is welcome. In our Gospel reading, Jesus makes it clear that he has not come only for the Jews in first century Palestine.

Verse 16:

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

And this is a continuing process. Just as there was, for each of us, a time when we not yet Christ followers, there is a world out there with billions in just that position. And we need to welcome them – to be Jesus to them. We can do things organisationally with shops and cafes and smiles on the Welcome desk, but a decision on whether or not to be a welcoming person lies with each of us. Imagine what a community would be like if it was made up entirely of those who had chosen to be welcoming, friendly people.

The next theme is worship. As you might have picked up, one of the eight essential qualities of Healthy Churches which we talk about in the Diocese is inspiring worship. It is through inspiring worship that we encounter the living God, and come to that place where the things of earth grow strangely dim, where distorted perspective is restored. One of the key things I have learned as I engage with the churches of the Diocese is that style doesn’t matter; authenticity does. I have profoundly encountered God in the exuberance of charismatic worship, in the quietness of a Taize service, at benediction in a Roman Catholic monastery and during the Eucharist here. The way the service is led, most of can do little about but we can do a lot about our preparation for worship. Imagine a congregation coming together where all came full of anticipation with prepared, tender hearts. There are stories in the Old Testament of how normal activity had to stop because the
glory of the Lord so filled the temple. Don’t you just long to see that in our day?

Moving on to the third theme, **reconciliation**. That is a word that, in this place, has a huge significance and meaning. My sense, though, is that there is an aspect of reconciliation we don’t think about too much and that is being reconciled with ourselves. We think a lot about being at peace with others but are we truly at peace with ourselves? Are we carrying burdens from the recent past or, perhaps, the deep past which belong at the foot of the cross not on our shoulders weighing us down? Are there things for which we need to choose to forgive ourselves? To gently allow ourselves to see ourselves through the eyes of a loving God rather than through the eyes of harsh self criticism? There are many things which can stop us truly entering into the freedom which we are given as daughters and sons of the King of Kings; but rather than be overwhelmed by them, let’s remember we serve a Lord who died and rose again so that we can be truly free.

The fourth theme is **resource**. And our personal exploration of this area needs to in the light of our encounter with the other three. If we are people who seek to welcome without judgement, to worship with passion, to be reconciled to ourselves and others, why would be not want to respond to all that the Lord means to us and has done for us with our time, talents and treasure?

To follow the good shepherd is to travel with him. And there is no promise of an easy journey. The news reports of recent weeks are telling stories of martyrdom which most of us thought belonged to past ages. But, just as the good shepherd laid down his life, our fellow Christ followers are, even today, doing the same thing. And that is sobering. For all of us have to ask ourselves
what we would do in the situation where the choice is to disown Christ or pay the ultimate cost of discipleship.

Our passage from John’s gospel is a very well known passage and much has been written about it. The commentators discuss the word good in the phrase good shepherd. Some would prefer noble shepherd or worthy shepherd. But the alternative I like most comes from Bishop Tom Wright, who talks about the beautiful shepherd. Not a comment on appearance but the attractiveness of what Jesus was and is doing. The beauty of the Lord and the beauty of all he has done for us draws us to him, ever deeper, ever closer.

How prepared are we to be drawn by him?

As we travel with him, aspects of our lives which are not fully surrendered to his rule and reign will be exposed. And to make progress, things will have to change, things which have become idols will have to go, wrong attitudes will be have to be confronted and wrong thinking and misunderstanding corrected. But, as we engage with the challenge, our beautiful shepherd walks with us, leading us on, speaking to us, longing for us to be fully free.

All of us here this morning will be at different places on our journey with the Beautiful shepherd.

As you listen to him speak to you, what next step is he calling you, calling me to take?

Amen