

# My sheep hear my voice -

## *I know them and they follow me*

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*The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2019 by the Associate Vicar, the Revd. Wendy Wale, in Beverley Minster.*

*Acts 9:36-43; John 10:22-30*

As you may know, Tom (my husband) Jonah (the cockapoo on a lead) and I have just come back from a week in Northumberland. Apart from the stunning beaches, one of the greatest delights has been walking through fields of sheep and their lambs obviously thinking deeply about this mornings readings....

*- My sheep hear my voice, I know them and they follow me.*

Jesus spent the first 30 years of his life living a simple, rural life, working with his hands. He chose his closest friends and companions, male and female from everyday folk who weren't theologians, rabbis, leaders or necessarily deep thinkers....he engaged with fisherman and farmers, widows and prostitutes, tax collectors and beggars. He told stories about sheep and pigs and dung, soil and crops and treasure, pennies and mustard seeds and birds. His stories were simple and every day.

He showed what faith looked like through every day actions: healing the sick, empowering the poor and the marginalized, touching the unclean and feeding the hungry. His words and actions challenging the religious leaders and political powers that sought to keep the status quo.

Jesus called everyday people who worked with their hands. As they, like sheep, learnt to trust and follow him- they went on to change the world with their words and deeds.

The story we heard read earlier about Tabitha or Dorcas is a perfect example of what this simple, hands-on, faith in action can look like. I hope it encourages us to continue

our own faith journeys following like sheep- listening to the shepherd, bringing hope to the world.

**Dorcas was a woman and a disciple**....she was obviously highly regarded and respected in the local community. Remembering that the resurrected Jesus chose to appear first to women- it's no surprise that stories of the early church speak of women with wealth, status, leadership gifts and powerful faith. Throughout church history, women have pioneered and given sacrificially to make Jesus' love known and of course, they continue to do so.... But we all know that globally there is still a huge gender equality challenge. 31 million girls of primary school age are not in school- poverty and lack of access being the key barriers. I'm aware that many of you have sponsored children in Uganda through Compassion, Tom and I similarly support Mercy and her education and community in Malawi. In our own country the gender pay and role gap is still huge and the church has such potential to raise up and empower – valuing all people as equal and of worth. It's thanks to my Methodist childhood that I was preaching and leading worship by the age of 14 – with a female Bishop regularly worshipping with us when home from Kenya. Role models and opportunities to grow and flourish have a huge impact....

**Dorcas was devoted to good works and acts of charity**- what a wonderful thing to be said of a person. Dorcas used her wealth and position to support others in an unequal society. Jesus identified the poor as blessed and the rich as needy...and ministered to them both. The reality is that we all need each other and can learn from each other- there is much we don't know about Dorcas- but she was living with the reality of being part of a dynamic community that was made up of a diversity of people who cared for each other. I hope that as a church we continue to break down divisions and labels that might divide us, and continue to recognize the gift that we are to each other- regardless of our age, gender, race, social status, bank balance or academic track record. Each of us have gifts to give and areas where we need support and care from others. One of our congregation has recently been housebound due to a broken bone- and a former nurse visited daily to change her dressing and offer the unique gift

of practical care. Another member has journeyed through the final weeks of cancer with her friend- demonstrating fully what love looks like even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

**Dorcus became ill and died**...As a community we are only too aware of the impact of sickness and death on all our lives. We all have times when we feel too old, in too much pain, too young, too broken or too damaged to carry on or have an important part to play. We are like sheep when they fall on their backs- unable to right themselves and in desperate trouble if no-one comes to help. When Dorcas dies, Lydia calls other disciples who send for Peter...he answers their call and miraculously restores Dorcas to life.

Today we celebrate St John of Beverley and there will be a special service this afternoon, following the trip out to his birth place at Harpham last Thursday. Bede described St John as ' a humble man of prayer with a remarkable ministry to those who are sick or disabled.' And many people continue to come to the Minster today to seek solace or healing- often lighting a candle here where St John's remains are buried to remember a loved one who has died.

There is so much around death and healing that we can't understand - our scientific and medical breakthroughs have achieved so much- and our prayers for healing are always heard....but there is still loss and grief and pain- both here and around the world. It was an absolute privilege to hear David Almond speak at Sunday at 7 the other week. He shared powerfully about his life time work in healing as a urologist and the loss of his and Anne's precious daughter Catherine to measles. Another bass from the choir- Alastair, ran the London Marathon inspired to raise money to support the research for dementia- a cruel condition for which there is yet no cure.

As the community of the Minster, the place of St John- let us continue to strive to be a place of healing- through our prayers and actions, but let us also seek to be a place that brings life to dead places- hope to the hopeless, release from captivity, glimmers of faith when life has turned people away, love to those who feel loveless and alone. We seek to do that through the sheer beauty and prayerfulness of this place for pilgrims down the

years- offering space to think and pray, through listening to the utter beauty of the music that we are so privileged to enjoy week after week. But also through the many small groups that we invite people to join- a way to share our lives with others and hopefully to feel safe enough to open up and allow others to be part of our healing and growing.

We will be starting several new home groups very shortly and are so grateful for all those who have signed up already to be a part of them. We also have groups for young families and for children, for those who like to walk and those who like to chat in the pub. Groups for those who live alone and for those who love to be outdoors in the gardens or around the Minster. Groups for those who pray and for those who love to care for others or care for the building. As we finish this morning, I'm going to tell you about one group in more detail

As Peter came to the place where Dorcas had died, he was greeted by the widows who showed him all the clothing and needlework she had created. A celebration of someone who worked with her hands- using her practical skills to transform the lives of others. There is suggestion that she herself was perhaps a widow- finding support from others in the same position.

I'm sure many of you will have guessed which group I'm going to talk about- we have in the Minster our very own Dorcas! An amazing group of women who use their needlework skills to help create and enhance so much of the beauty and worship within this place.

Thanks to Libby for interviewing the members of Dorcas so I can share some fascinating facts with you. The 8 of them (newcomers are welcome!) meet weekly in the vicars vestry with coffee and chocolate biscuits. On a regular basis they are responsible for the upkeep of The Banners, the St John embroideries, Altar frontals, pulpit/desk falls, altar linen (corporals, palls, purificators) and the altar cloths. Upkeep of gowns and cassocks (if asked nicely!) . They've been running on and off for 50 years and their big projects include:

- Creating The Millennium Altar frontal (the one with green patchwork)
- Re-backing of the purple altar frontal

- Restoration of the Green Pulpit/desk falls
- Design and making stoles
- Decoration of a Christmas tree for the Christmas tree festival. We have managed to do one every year (so far) since the Minster's Christmas Tree Festival was launched in 2011

When asked why they do it- the answers were almost all the same:-

*“Sewing is something I love doing, so doing it for the church and in enjoyable company is lovely.”*

*“The fabrics are part of the visual liturgy and we are part of the pastoral care by our maintenance of them.”*

I just love the fact our Dorcas ladies illustrate everything we've been thinking about today - the joy and power of community, turning faith into practical action, being part of creating a healing place whose impact touches the lives of regular worshippers as well as the 60,000 visitors each year.

The story of Dorcas offers encouragement to everyone- not just those who sew, but those who polish brass or sing in the choir, everyone who pours cups of tea or shops for their neighbour, to each person who recycles plastic, buys fairtrade coffee, serves pilgrims in the shop, seeks justice through their daily work, brings healing through their words and prayers, signs petitions, nurtures the next generation, carefully considers their vote or arranges flowers.... Practical faith, love in action, transforming the world as we trust the Shepherd and listen to his voice.

My sheep hear my voice- I know them and they follow me- I give them eternal life and they will never perish.....

## Reading Texts

John 10: 22-30

22 At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. 24 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." 25 Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; 26 but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. 27 My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. 30 The Father and I are one."

Acts 9: 36-43

36 Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas.[h] She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. 37 At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. 38 Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." 39 So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. 40 Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. 41 He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. 42 This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. 43 Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.