

Easter 4  
Twente, Nijmegen

Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25  
John 10:1-10

### **The Voice of the Shepherd We can Trust**

Who can we trust these days? It's a real problem. Research shows that nowadays people have less confidence in other people and even less in public institutions. In this climate, finding out what is true and reliable is hard, and building is even harder.

A MORI public opinion poll in the UK showed that trust in government has been dropping since the 1960s, regardless of who is in charge. When asked 'How much do you trust British government of any party to place the needs of the nation before the interests of their own party?', 75% now say 'somewhat or never'. It mattered little whether Labour or Tories (with or without the Lib Dems) were in charge. Over 30 years ago, nearly half the British public still trusted governing parties to put nation before self-interest.

There used to be "respected professions" – law, education, politics, medicine, and ministry. Doctors and teachers still retain public confidence, (getting 91 & 85% respectively), but police, lawyers, journalists and, of course, politicians, rank lower than ever before.

Trust in institutions and professions is down, but so is trust in other people, in general. Witness the rise in gated communities and home security systems. We say 'hello' to strangers we pass on the street far less than we used to, especially in cities. There is less respect for those in authority. Admittedly, some authorities deserve less deference than they got or get: the Nazis, the Apartheid regime, etc. But in the democratic West, leaders get little benefit of the doubt anymore. The honeymoon of favorable public favor after an election is shorter than ever.

For some of this, leadership itself is to blame, by the harrowing criticism they throw at the opposition and the exaggerated expectations they invite for their own programs. The public plays into it. Example: many now expect healthcare to be cheap, universally available, efficient and always successful. No wonder many reckon their health care systems are doomed.

We live in an age of unparalleled scientific achievement, yet we are dissatisfied, great prosperity (with occasional economic downturns), yet we are often dissatisfied.

Modern philosophy and liberation movements have also taught us to be critical about truth claims and suspicious of authority, but they have also left us without much of a moral compass. The modern worldview, though, has not really empowered us much at all. As Os Guinness puts it, one of the ironies of postmodernism is that when the truth dies, all that is left is the power principle. "Just as iron filings are drawn to the strongest magnet, so minds weakened by a loss of truth are drawn to the most powerful positions" (Os Guinness, *Time for Truth*, 57) Or as Sam Rayburn, longtime US Senator put it, "When two men agree on everything, one of them is probably doing all the thinking." Bad news.

Our Lord wanted us to trust him, but not because we are gullible. His disciples were educated not trust the likes of power-hungry Herod, the hypocritical Pharisees, the devious chief priests or scribes. When Jesus sent out his disciples, he sent them as sheep among the wolves, but warning them to be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matt 10:16).

What is needed today is not to reject the idea of truth or to become incapable of trust. What we need is the wisdom to discern whom to trust and why.

Jesus offers himself, not only as the Good Shepherd – taking up the role foretold by Jeremiah 23 and Ezekiel 34, where the Lord, tired of the deceptions and abuse of the leaders of the people, would come and be the Good Shepherd for them

John 10, where Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd (10:11) but also the Gate, is all about him staking a claim to the truth and to trust.

Paradoxically, the main method of learning that Jesus is the One we can trust is simply this: get to know Him as the Good Shepherd. Familiarity breeds devotion. Take some time. Read about his words and his works in the Bible. Consider them. Test them. Listen to how they speak to your own situation. Experience relationship. You will then see why and how he is uniquely trustworthy.

The paradox is: To know the Christ, to recognize his voice against the background noise of modern life, you just have to get to know him. If you do not try it out, you may never know the truth. To know him, you have to know him.

But if you do, if you get to know the Good Shepherd, who is also the Gate to salvation and abundant life, then you will know why he is the real thing and others are not. The thief enters by any other way than the gate. Lilius Trotter, an English missionary to North Africa, compared the thief to Satan: “he comes silently and secretly, without warning, to rob us of God’s grace and joy and strength, and to seek to destroy Christ’s life in our souls”.

He does this by exploiting our fears and foibles. And one is our destructive anger. He knows that despite what we tell children, we experience that sticks and stones can break your bones, but words do indeed hurt us. And we remember criticism above and beyond a 1000 words of praise. That is why St Peter urges us to turn to Christ when feel abused, verbally or physically (and Peter was writing to slaves, who were, sadly, legally subjected to both!): <sup>19</sup>For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup>If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval.’ This is what Jesus himself did, and because he demonstrated the power of faith through suffering, we are saved. <sup>25</sup>For you [and I] were going astray like sheep, now [we] have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Archbishop Basil Hume, former Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, gave this tip. If unfairly criticized, unjustly treated, insulted or ignored, try this: bite your lips and say ‘thanks be to God.’ “You will still feel furious,” Hume noted, “but that prayer, said when you are churned up and upset, is extraordinarily valuable and does bring a deep peace – eventually. Remember that our Lord was terribly insulted and hurt and he just said, ‘Father forgive them, for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34).” So we can rely on Christ to resist the thief of the grace God planted in us.

The other threat, the other imposter, aside from the thief, is the stranger. The stranger can be a newfangled approach, the novelty that so many feel they need in the search for personal truth today. But Trotter interestingly also suggests that it may be “the one who, under the pretence of friendship, would lure us from the truth of following Christ.” “It may well be that these whom God counts as strangers, may be the nearest to us in earthly relationship, for it is often these who try to draw the soul away.” It is one of the hardest things when someone we love is estranged from God. Perhaps Jesus speaks to this in John 10:16: <sup>16</sup>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. That is ultimately in God’s hands, but it need also be in our prayers and in our love for that person.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> figure undeserving of trust in the Good Shepherd passage John ch. 10, is in vv 12-13 (after our passage). It is the hired hand. He runs away when the going gets tough, unlike the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep. “The hireling”, Trotter suggests, “is a picture of the world that is only friendly while all is prosperous, and leaves us carelessly to be a prey when distress comes. Foolish is the sheep that trusts this hireling.” Trotter is right. The thief is an obvious threat, but both the stranger (or, as Trotter also suggests, the familiar person who is a stranger to Christ) and the hired hand pose the harder challenges.

Why are we on sure footing when we trust in Christ above all? Compare his teaching to anyone else’s – the Sermon on the Mount, the parables, to anything else. Compare his works of healing, of feeding the hungry, and of lifting up the oppressed, to anyone else’s. What he said and what he did matched. And consider his supreme act: Dying not just good sheep but also the bad. And for the stranger, the hired hand, and the thief. “Very rarely,” St Paul wrote, “will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God showed his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Others would have run away. Not the Good Shepherd, who is the Gate of Salvation.