

Easter 4 Sunday 11 May

Those of you who were here last week will have discovered that I have been preaching for over 50 years. Most times I can gain some good ideas from the texts and the many books I have bought. But sometimes, I find it difficult to see the main features of the 3 readings that have been chosen by a group of experts. Fortunately, my wife breezed in from work and told me that she had gone shopping for some dog food. There she bumped into two people from our village. They are very friendly, but as they live at the other side of the village, so we rarely see them. She is an American citizen and somehow or another, she got talking about Donald Trump. Her major concern is the impact that he is having on her homeland. Sadly, there are great many other countries with much greater difficulties and terrible situations. All three of this morning's readings are about the difficulties that might come our way.

The first reading came from the Book of Acts (9: 26-43). It is about a Christian woman called Tabitha who was always doing good and helping the poor and then suddenly she dies. Her friends followed the usual practice of washing the body, but instead of anointing it and burying it, they laid it in an upper room, where it would enjoy privacy. These actions suggest that they had some hopes that Tabitha might be raised from the dead. The incident may testify to a belief in some parts of the early church that Christians would not die before the return of the Lord but would be resurrected. In any case the Christians in Joppa felt sufficient faith in the possibility of resurrection to send for Peter and bid him to come at once.

As soon as Peter arrived, he was taken to where she had been laid. The house was now occupied by mourners, including a group of widows who showed Peter the clothes that Tabitha had made for them. The care of widows and other needy people was a religious duty in the community and a Christian community would naturally follow Jewish practice in caring for the poor. So, these godly women had great expectations of Peter. The dead woman responded to Peter's call by opening her eyes and sitting up. Only then did Peter give her his hand and help her to stand up. The miracle was brought about only by prayer and the word of command. Finally, Peter summoned the Christians and the widows to rejoice with Tabitha. He stayed in the town and his work led to many conversions.

One of the really great things that has happened over many years is that Christians have continued to care for the sick and the dying. In the United Kingdom a nurse called Cicely Saunders came to the realisation that the normal hospitals were not the best places for people who were dying. So, she started the first Hospice in 1967. This was such a great help to people that many more hospices for adults and in 1990 for children became a great help to the patients. The idea has also reached Germany. I know for sure, as one of my neighbours spend his last days in a hospice in Mainz. In my time in England, I was often in Hospices. They are a fantastic example of one godly man, Peter giving an idea to a Christian woman nearly 2000 years later.

The second reading from the Book of Revelation (7: 9-11) takes us into a different form of problems.

The apostle John is facing a nightmare with the little communities to whom he sent his book. They are not confronted with illness, but persecution. In order that they don't collapse in fear or run away from their task, they are given a vision of a vast army of Christians from all over the world from every tribe and nation dressed in white. He tells them that are our sisters and brothers who have been active before their time. Some two thousand years later, they are still calling out to the people of God. There are millions of them standing in the stadium, with God

and the lamb whispering not only to have no fear and but also not to be overwhelmed by the darkness around us. The whole point of this scene is that we, God's people, are not forgotten

Psalm 91 describes our situation very well: "They who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, ...will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday."

Of course, neither Psalm 91 nor Revelation chapter 7 means that Christians are insulated against trouble. This is where Christian communities should follow the example of John. He got in touch with people by sending letters. We can still do that, but we have also got mobile phones. I am also glad to have heard that some of you visit older members who can't get about anymore. There is something else that I do when I am working in Wiesbaden. I look out to see, if we have got new visitors or someone I have known for a bit and they look a bit down. It has brought some very good results. It is not easy for someone on their own to go up to someone they have never met. So if you see someone new go and welcome them. It is obviously better if it is female to female or male to male but, in the end, it depends on you. There is a downside to this sometimes. I get talking to someone and miss out on someone I really wanted to see. But as I said before, I can always ring them up after church

Let us now turn to the last of the readings this morning, from the Gospel of John (10:22ff.).

Jesus has gone up to the Jerusalem in the middle of winter to an important feast. As he is walking round, he is confronted by what is clearly a group of men ready for a confrontation. This is what the theologian Tom Wright says what we might have expected.

Often when we think of Jesus as the good shepherd, we have an image of him with flowers in his hair, surrounded by happy children, with a few sheep as well to give the picture a pastoral touch. I remember such pictures from my childhood.

The reality - the real question he was talking about when he spoke of himself as the good shepherd - was and is very different. It was and is all about power and rule, about power and rule, about God's kingdom and the world's kingdoms, about God appointing a true king, not where there had been a vacuum waiting for someone to fill it, but where there had been too many kings, too many rulers, and all of them anxious and ready to strike out at anyone trying to stake a new claim.

This description we have just heard is so similar to what the last news we have come across this week. We human beings are so often driven to seek power at any price and to dominate the lives of those around us. In Jesus we find a completely different relationship. God is clearly described as a Father; Jesus is seen as a shepherd who constantly protects and guides his sheep to the right places. The reason Jesus can be so confident of this is that the guarantee is his own unbreakable bond of love and union with the father and the fact that the sheep he owns are the ones the father has given him.

The three readings we have heard from Peter, John and Jesus are about the impact of Jesus on the way we live. We are no longer alone, our lives have a purpose, we have hope and we have a life beyond death. Above all, we have a God who is willing to go to great lengths at all times and in all places to be alongside us. So much so that even when we walk the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no ill for God will be with us. That is as clear as a bell. WE shall overcome some day.