

## Whose voice are we listening to today in our desert?

As a young girl she went to church probably to escape her abusive father and find solace. There she heard the minister speak weekly about missionaries and as he spoke of David Livingstone, she heard the voice of Jesus telling her to follow in his footsteps. From an early age, Mary Slessor had deep compassion and empathy for the lost and abandoned children in the streets of our world.

She lived with the tribal people in Western Africa, where her heart was breaking for what she witnessed. Women being buried alive with their dead husbands, cannibalism, and the killing of infants.

She then would kneel down and pray, *“Lord, the task is impossible for me but not for Thee. Lead the way and I will follow. Why should I fear? I am on a Royal Mission. I am in the service of the King of Kings.”*

Bravely, Mary transformed whole communities with the love of the Gospel; starting orphanages, preaching the Good News, standing up for women’s rights, and saving many innocent lives from death. Today, hospitals, schools, orphanages, and churches all stand because of the impact of one Scottish woman, Mary Slessor.

All because she heard the voice of the Good Shepherd. *“Come and follow me.”*

Jesus said, *“The sheep follow me because they know my voice.”* V4

In today's world who are we following?

George Barna, founder of The Barna Group, a market research firm specialising in studying the religious beliefs and behaviour of Americans, recently asked high school students where they would turn first in times of tension, confusion or crisis, and the answer, perhaps not surprisingly, was that they would turn to their music and personal friends before even their parents.

The survey gives an indication about who young people are listening to and who informs their decisions in life.

This is the heart of Jesus' teaching in our reading today. Here in this metaphor of the Good Shepherd, he asks the simple question, who are we listening to today?

John in his Gospel has given us a direct and simple solution to who we should listen to. Jesus is the true Shepherd and he calls people to follow him and listen to him.

To be a shepherd in Palestine, would have been very challenging and your main task was to protect the sheep.

The desert in Israel runs along the edge of every major city or town. It stretches for thousands of miles across the River Jordan, into the eastern plateaus and on through Saudi Arabia and Iraq – nothing but arid and dry land.

Water is scarce, food is rare and dangers are everywhere. There are many steep cliffs, wild animals roaming, searching for food, bandits on the road, looking for easy prey. The desert is a hostile environment and not for the faint hearted.

If a shepherd was to survive, he needed his wits about him.

It is in this context that Jesus is speaking about shepherding.

But it is a context of the world. A place of challenge and dangers. We need a shepherd to guide us.

What are the deserts that we face today?

What is the biggest threat to us as Christians?

I suppose it is losing our relationship with the Living God. It is losing sight of the shepherd, like the lost sheep in Jesus' parable.

In our early Fellowship meeting on a Tue and Thur, we considered the nation of Taiwan. Taiwan, is a relatively small island with 25 million people cramped together.

Taiwan is where many of our goods were manufactured. The spiritual challenges that this nation faces according to Operation World is materialism. The land of material items!

The book said, "Materialism is one of the greatest barriers to the good news in today's Taiwan. Many people are very focussed on their career, on their children's education, and how to live the most affluent life possible. There is very little time for spiritual nourishment or ministry."

That picture of Taiwan is not too dissimilar to what we see here in the Western world.

Careers, education and a good life style is not wrong in themselves but when they become the most important factors of people's lives, then something suffers, and what suffers is our spiritual lives which are filled with stuff and things and so our lives become a spiritual desert and the ground is dry and hard.

We live in a modern desert. We might want to fix the church and make it more modern and appealing and attractive to those who don't come and yes, we should always be aware of reaching out to those who are outside, but the reality is that unless people see their need for a spiritual life then we are swimming against the tide and it's going to be a challenge.

Through lockdown, we saw a resurgence of people embracing the spiritual side of life whether that was online attendance at services or appreciating nature and taking time to look deeper into their souls.

We are part of this modern desert world; we also live in the spiritual desert and what Jesus teaches us is how to survive the desert life.

Basically, it comes down to this question.

In the midst of our desert world of moral chaos, abounding materialism resulting in a secular world; in this threatening desert, whose voice, which shepherd, will we follow?

Who will we listen to?

So, the challenge this morning is – are we following Jesus? Are we making time to reshape and mould our lives in his ways? Are we reading our Scriptures? Are we making time each day to create a devotional life so that we can listen to him and hear his voice?

What can we expect from following the Good Shepherd. Well, Psalm 23 tells us that if we follow the Good Shepherd we will not lack for anything. It is not promised to be easy; there will be dark valleys but there will be also times of blessing, where he makes us lie down in green pastures. He leads us to these green places where we can be nourished, even in the desert. He knows where the still waters are and so he guides us to them so that we are refreshed. His paths are the right paths and he will guide us along them. He walks with us in the darkness and he protects us with his staff and his rod. His crook is ever to hand, to make sure that we don't stray. And we are so protected that even in the presence of enemies, he will bless us and we will have a banquet as he anoints us with the oil of blessing and our cup overflows.

Isn't that a wonderful picture of what it means to follow the Good Shepherd in the desert of life?

Then Jesus took it one step further when he said, *the Good Shepherd will even lay down his life for his sheep. He will go to the cross that we might know God's love.* That's a shepherd worth following, that's the shepherd that Mary Slessor devoted her life to.

Martin Luther King, Jr. sat at a table in his house one night, thinking about a beautiful little daughter who had just been born. He thought about the fact that she could be taken from him any minute. He thought about his dedicated wife who was asleep, and how she could be taken from him, or he could be taken from her. He and his family received death threats. As he thought about these things, he felt weak. His father was 175 miles away, up in Atlanta. He couldn't call on his mother. But he remembered the Person his father used to tell him about, the Power that can make a way when there is no way. The shepherd who would guide him in times of danger.

MLK realised that religion had to become real for him. This was where the rubber met the road. He had to know God for himself. Sitting at that table, with his hands on his head, he prayed a prayer. He prayed out loud. He said, *"Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I am right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. And I can't let people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak."*

It seemed he could hear an inner voice saying, *"Martin Luther King, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world."*

You know, he heard the voice of the Good Shepherd telling him to fight on, promising never to leave him alone. MLK said, *"Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared."*

Whatever you may be facing in your life, remember that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8 NIV). When you feel weak, call upon Him. He will strengthen you and help you to do what's right.

Whose voice will we listen to in our desert today?

He is patiently waiting for us to turn to him and to follow him.

Psalm 23 finishes with these beautiful words, "Surely goodness and love will follow me, all the days of my life and I dwell in the house of the Lord forever more."

This is what it means to follow the good shepherd, to know his mercy and his love literally following you all the days of your life. They follow you like sheep dogs, surrounding you with care and protection; and the secret: dwell in the house of the Lord, dwell in his presence and don't let him out of your sight.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Amen