

## Sermon – Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> April 2026 (Wesley Guy)

Acts 2: 41-47 and John 10: 1-10

Who have you been listening to this past week? There are lots of people out there wanting to be heard. I'm not thinking so much at the moment about friends and family, but the wider set of voices in our culture. Have you plucked up the courage to switch on the news on a radio or tv channel lately and to listen to the voices of our national leaders? Do you listen to podcasts? Or pay attention to influencers on social media. You've almost certainly heard the voices of advertisers whether you like it or not. And with local elections due very soon, have you had canvassers on the doorstep? Lots of voices around clamouring for our attention, often with very contradictory accounts of truth, reality and what makes for the good life. Which voices should we listen to?

That's the question that Jesus has in mind in the parable we heard about in our reading from John's gospel, John's account of the good news. But it might not be immediately obvious that it's about voices because it's a parable about sheep and a shepherd and here in England that tends to make us think about sheepdogs and the amazing partnership between a shepherd and his or her dog rounding up the sheep. But in the ME things are rather different. The shepherd has no dog but leads the sheep to pasture calling out to them to follow. At night the shepherd might lead the sheep into a fold with a wall around it where they would be safe from predators but they would probably be mixed up with a load of sheep from other flocks belonging to other shepherds. In the morning the shepherd would come to the fold and call out and the sheep from his flock would recognise his voice and come out and follow him off to some good green pasture. But if a stranger comes to the fold whose voice the sheep don't recognise they will shy away, sensing danger and rightly so because who knows it may be a sheep rustler who's going to cause death and destruction.

We tend to think of sheep as pretty stupid animals don't we. But here Jesus suggests we have something to learn from them. Think carefully which voices you are listening to. Listening to the wrong voices can be disastrous – and we don't have to look very far in our contemporary culture to find examples of when it is so. Jesus' language at first sounds quite extreme – that some of those who want to get their voices heard have an agenda to steal and kill and destroy. But if we pause to think about some of the voices available particularly on-line today, maybe that language is not so extreme after all.

Some voices have an agenda to steal and kill and destroy, like a sheep thief only after what he can make. In contrast Jesus' agenda is to care for the sheep – for those who follow him – make them safe them and lead them to pasture.

Millions in each generation and across many cultures over the past two thousand years have found that Jesus' voice is indeed the voice worth listening to. That listening to Jesus's voice is indeed a secure and fulfilling approach to life, a way which leads them as it were to good green pastures - into a new quality, a new and rewarding dimension of life.

When our sons were younger for quite a few years we had a succession of pairs of guinea pigs. The thing about guinea pigs is that during the long winter months they have to be kept reasonably warm and dry in a cage or hutch. But there comes a point in March or April where at last the weather has warmed up and the grass has dried out and the guinea pigs can go out on the lawn to graze on the grass. And it's a joy to see them then giving little hops and leaps of delight as they enjoy the lush spring grass. It's what guinea pig life really should be like – guinea pigs living their best life as we might say. And of course it's a very similar image that Jesus uses in his parable of leading the sheep out to pasture. Enjoying the good pasture – it's a sheep's idea of what life is meant to be – an image of living the best life. And that leads us on to the statement which Jesus

makes at the end of our reading: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Life in abundance. That’s a promise which I think chimes with our human experience and with the desires of people in our contemporary culture. One version of the Bible translates Jesus’s words as “I came so that they might have life and have it to the full”. And we like to feel that we are living life to the full, don’t we.

How would you like an exciting journey to trek in the Andes and see the remains of Macchu Picchu? Or maybe in a more romantic frame of mind you aspire to go with your partner to visit the Taj Mahal in India? Or perhaps you would prefer a stay in a tropical overwater bungalow? Well don’t worry, I am not starting up in business as a travel agent, but these are some of the top items that are on people’s bucket lists. And the bucket list is I think rather a quintessential contemporary expression of our desire to live life to the full. We have to shuffle off this mortal coil at some point – but we will at least make sure we have a series of memorable and remarkable experiences first. And of course there are other ways that people seek to live life to the full through family and relationships, through career success, through material possessions and security.

All of these things do, of course, have the potential to enrich many of our lives in ways we can be thankful to God for. Who doesn’t enjoy an exciting holiday or appreciate living in a nice home. But are these the things Jesus is talking about when he offers abundant life? I think not. Jesus didn’t have anything we would recognise as material security or prosperity. He didn’t have a rewarding career in any conventional sense. There were no exciting travel opportunities available, other than where you could get to on foot. And even Jesus own family’s relationship with him was often strained. And as it was for Jesus, so it is for many people in our community and around the world. Those opportunities for excitement and fulfilment that many of us prize are often simply not available. And yet, says Jesus, and yet

– even in the absence of these things – he offers life, life in abundance, an overflowing richness of life. How do we make sense of that claim?

Our own lives, lived by our own resources and in our own independence, are ultimately limited and fragile. But God is the one who has that abundance of life – life that is unlimited and overflowing. Psalm 36 says “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life....”

An abundance of life. An overflowing fountain of life. Jesus came to put us in touch with that life of God. So that as human beings we might be set free to reconnect with that divine source of the life that we enjoy.

I mentioned a moment ago the guinea pigs we used to have at home. Well, as you would expect we gave them all names. In our case they were all named after characters in the Beano. We started off with Gnasher and Gnipper, we had Billy and Dennis, Minnie and Ivy. It’s quite a fun exercise to name our animals.

A middle eastern shepherd does something similar and has a name for each sheep in his flock. And in our reading this morning the shepherd doesn’t simply call out generally – he knows each of his animals by name and calls out to each by name to make sure they are following and to lead them out to that good green pasture.

As we have been reminded in the baptism service this morning, God knows us and calls us each by name. And his call to follow him into abundant life is one that he makes to each of us by name.

“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

It’s an inspiring promise. But does it do anything more for us than give us a good feeling for a few minutes in church on a Sunday morning? We may be asking what does it mean in concrete practical

terms. And that's a fair question. So it would be good at this point to get some help in answering that question from our other Bible reading from the Acts of the Apostles, because here we find the story of what happened after Jesus was raised from the dead and had returned to God his Father and how his first followers, empowered with the gift of his Spirit, tried to make it real, tried to live it out in practice. What did it mean for them to start to experience this abundant life that Jesus brings? Well this morning as we start to draw our thoughts to a close let's just briefly notice four ways in which Jesus' first followers and I suggest we too can respond to Jesus' promise of life in abundance.

We read first about Jesus's followers as "All who **believed**". What united them was belief in Jesus. Now in English "belief" can still sound a bit abstract and theoretical, but the original work in Greek covers all the meanings of our words belief and faith and trust. The first and fundamental step to enjoy life in abundance is to come to the point where we say Jesus is the one I trust, his is the voice I recognise and am going to listen to. We may still have all kinds of questions and uncertainties unresolved, but we say – out of all those competing voices we thought about at the beginning, Jesus is the one I trust to have the authority to lead me into life. **Trusting** is where we start.

Then we read that "all who believed – who trusted in Jesus - were **together**" – because along with trusting goes **belonging**. God's abundant life rarely comes to us not as isolated individuals but as people he calls together into belonging and fellowship. Working together, learning together, using our gifts for each others' benefits and caring for each other in the face of life's joys and sorrows. To be seriously committed to each other in these ways, when we are not family in the ordinary sense and we are not necessarily a group of people who would otherwise have chosen each other as friends – that's both a demanding and quite a counter-cultural commitment. But it is part of God's method as it were of shaping and refining us and enabling us to enter more deeply into life.

Those first followers of Jesus we read "had all things in common" and they distributed to those in need. **Sharing** needs to be part of living the life. As we receive something of the abundance of God's life through trusting and belonging that should free us so that we don't have to cling quite so tightly to our own resources. And so generosity is a mark of God's abundant life touching our lives. For those with the means to do so, giving away meaningful amounts of money, time, talents and energy will we hope benefit those in need – but it will certainly also benefit us, because it will do something to free our hearts and make us more open to receive God's life.

Finally Jesus' first followers spent "much time in temple" "broke bread together" and these are reminders that this was a community for whom **worshipping** was fundamental. And that remains the distinctive thing for us – we are a worshipping community. Worshipping can become one of the deepest expressions of our connection with God's abundant life. Going back to the Psalm we mentioned before, do you remember that in it we are told that God promises us to drink from the river of his delights. And that is worship at its best. We simply delight in God because the experience of his presence fulfils us in a way nothing else can, giving us a real taste of that life, that life in abundance.

Trusting, belonging, sharing and worshipping - as we follow Jesus in these ways, as we let the Holy Spirit whom Jesus promised shape our lives according to this pattern – we can enter into a deepening experience of God's abundant life.

Jesus came to bring us abundant life, because Jesus as the one who is both human and divine – makes it possible for our apparently insignificant human lives to be united to, bound up with the unlimited and abundant life of God. And in this Easter season especially, we remember that that abundant life is also eternal life. Because as we are united with that life of Jesus, we are united with a life that has overcome death and risen again in glory.