

When I read the Gospel passage for today a while back, a phrase has kept going round in my head ever since:

'What lies beneath?'

What lies beneath the questions that Jesus is being asked?

Do they come from genuine seekers of truth?

The Jews who ask whether Jesus is the Messiah, the chosen one...

Do they *really* seek to know the one who can rescue them? Or is there another agenda going on?

They ask Jesus:

'How long will you keep us in suspense?

If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.'

How plain does it need to be?

Jesus has given the people around him plenty of verbal *truth* and miraculous *proof* of his being God. But they still question if his power *is* from God.

And Jesus already knows *what lies beneath*; they do not believe, in fact, they seek to discredit him.

But Jesus is **wholly** authentic.

He points out that his *actions* match his words - and his words and actions mirror God the Father. Jesus and God the Father are one. Their will is the same: to save, provide, guide and lead people *who genuinely listen out for God's voice*.

Jesus describes himself as **the shepherd** who cares for and looks after the flock, which in turn recognise his voice and follow him.

And he tells these questioners that **all** he does is aligned with God's purposes. He has come to bring eternal life to the lost sheep, to those God has given to him. And no-one, and nothing will ever snatch them from his hand.

For his sheep, this is such a reassuring message lying beneath. We are untouchable. Our eternal destiny can *never* be taken away from us.

We follow his voice, we recognise his lead and we trust that his promises are steadfast and eternal. We know that Jesus is the one who sustains and protects us. *Because sheep cannot look after themselves*.

We need the shepherd to lead, provide for us and guide us. And this *should* be enough for us to remain faithful followers of the Shepherd, recognising his authority and care throughout our lives.

But *sheep* have a tendency to go astray.

And there is an historical pattern for those who follow God, a pattern where they forget who their provider and sustainer is.

Picture the unthinking sheep, moving from one tuft of grass to another, ever snuffling out better pastures, heading away from the voice of protection and leading.

And in the same way that as the sheep seeking tastier grass wanders away from the Shepherd, until his voice grows dull and distant, there is nothing quite like comfort, security and success to dull down our need for God.

The writer in Deuteronomy 8 describes it so well. To paraphrase:

When we have our fill, when we find ourselves in a good place, when our finances are healthy, when we lack nothing, we easily find ourselves drifting away from our Creator, subconsciously growing proud and saying: v17

“My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.”

We must not forget that God is the Creator: the author of life, the source of all goodness, the provider. Today as we celebrate harvest and creation we remember that all this abundance, and the blessings given to us in nature are a gift **from God**. A gift we are to enjoy, care for, sustain ~ & acknowledge *did not come from ourselves*.

We may have spent a lifetime building our families, our relationships, our homes, our careers, our security...

But who gave us breath, and ability and creation's resources?

Remove God from all we have and we lose what lies beneath, the One who holds all things together.

We mustn't forget our true status. In him ***‘we live and move and have our being’*** ~ and without God, ***we are but dust.***

Moses' words are a warning as God's people head towards the Promised Land... and his words echo down to **us**: We are to remember God's goodness, and not neglect or misuse his resources. We are to acknowledge and remember that **all** we have, including our very breath, is the Lord's doing.

It seems to lie in our DNA to bleat and run to God when we are in need, but it is particularly easy to wander away when we are comfortable.

In the lead-up to Deuteronomy 8, the Israelites have gone through a tumultuous time. Their years of slavery have ended but a whole generation wanders in the wilderness for 40 years, during which time they vacillate between complaining against God and returning to him. They yo-yo between Independence-from and dependence-on God.

What about us?

Do we acknowledge that we need the Shepherd's lead at *all* times, or only when things are difficult?

Right now, I feel we are entering tricky pastures in our St Paul's Warm Welcome campaign. (*Update next week*)

- The tenders are back - and we are in lack
- We still have a 4th stage in the design process
- We don't have Planning permission yet
- We have neighbours who are concerned about the impact some aspects of the work may have on them
- We are struggling to find where we will store all the contents of the church when we only have access to the hall
- We are trying to plan Christmas within the uncertainty of timescales and facing another cold winter
- We do not yet have all the financial resources we need for the building works to start.

I can safely say it feels at times as if we are wandering into a season of wilderness ahead.

And I *long* for the time when St Paul's Church reaches the 'Promised Land' when our church building has been renewed. I wish for it all to be cleared and clean and warm, so that we can get on with the business of sharing the love of God with our community.

But what this passage in Deuteronomy reminds me, is that God is at work and to be praised whether we are *in need or in plenty*; in the wilderness OR the Promised Land.

His mission doesn't halt because of our circumstances. **What lies beneath it** all is the faithfulness of God; the eternal promises that never change.

And in the middle of our journeying, we are being renewed. Through the challenges and the upsets, God's grace is flowing like living waters to bring change and healing in our lives as we journey on.

And how *we are being formed through this* as the Lord's people, who we are when we emerge into this 'new pasture' will impact our community. And **we must not forget then**, what God has done for us. We must not let pride make us think that we made this happen, because right now, we are scarily dependent on the Shepherd to lead us forward.

Moses repeatedly instructs the people to be wholeheartedly faithful to God, encouraging them to spend lives listening to God and loving him, come what may.

Now the word 'love' in Hebrew refers not to an emotion or feeling. **What lies beneath** is deeper and bigger. To '**love God**' in the Old Testament context is to live a life *wholly* devoted to following and obeying God's commandments - loving him with one's entire will; 'heart, soul, mind and strength'. We are to be the sheep who faithfully and wholeheartedly follow the voice of the Shepherd.

And I ask myself, what are the foundations to loving and obeying God?

Because if we rely on our *circumstances* our relationship with God would be temperamental; we would blow hot and cold on God, depending on whether our circumstances are favourable or not. We would seek him out when in need and forget him when in plenty.

During the week I was in contact via text with my sister in law, whose youngest son, like ours, started university a few weeks ago. Jo texted to ask if I had heard from our son much. We found some commonality - that communication from students tends towards being rather scarce until, that is, there is a need for money or advice!

It is typical that we are driven to the source of provision when in need, and to forget when we lack nothing - or are having a great time at university!
Deuteronomy 8 v 18:

But remember the Lord your God, for he is the provider of all that we have. We are called to walk in God's ways and to praise and revere him.

What lies beneath all our activities? Is it self-sufficiency or an accurate and healthy view of who we are in relation to our Lord, and an understanding of our utter dependence on him. We are to recognise that we are the sheep and the Lord is our shepherd.

Don't forget God.

When all is going well, he is still Lord of our lives.

When all is *not* well, his promises are still *what lies beneath*.

Moses warned the people not to forget who their source is.

Just as Israel receives the land and its blessings from God; Jesus' sheep receive fresh pastures and eternal life from Him. The NLT reads in Deut 8 v 18:

Remember the Lord your God. He is the one who gives you power to be successful, in order to fulfill the covenant he confirmed to your ancestors with an oath.

We have a promise,

That the Shepherd leads us.

That he provides for us.

That eternal life will never be snatched from us.

If ever there was a God who deserves **not** to be forgotten it is our awesome God, *who lies beneath*, and is in and above and over all things.

So to finish,

When we are in a place of comfort and blessing will we remember who has led us there and continue to listen to His voice? Moses says:

"Remember the Lord who gave you the land" John says, in effect,

"Remember the Shepherd who gives you life."

But whatever you do...

Do not forget the Lord.