

The world faces a major challenge: how to balance health with the economy. Or as some have more crudely put it: health and wealth. To what extent can the economy be allowed to suffer with sustained isolation in order to promote physical health. In essence, how many lives can be saved at what economic cost? The argument is complex. The shutdowns that save lives from Covid-19 exposure could equally cost lives through delayed medical treatment and starvation. We cannot ignore the consequences of deteriorating mental health through unhealthy homes, family violence, incarceration, loss of jobs, business stress and significant future uncertainty. We are already seeing mental stress issues escalating and they will continue to do so. The responsibility of managing this balancing act is not one anyone would envy. In NZ, with our wealth of resources and competent leadership, we have enjoyed amongst the best medical response in the world, but the economic jury is still out. There is still a long way to go with this virus and things can change quickly as has been experienced overseas.

Balancing what is right and good, whilst determining a course of action and getting on with things, is exactly what we find at play in our text in Acts this morning. Proverbs 21:3 reminds us that, **“To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.”** In Jerusalem, in the aftermath of Jesus' resurrection, ascension and the events of Pentecost, Luke the writer of Acts, takes us meet with the disciples who were attempting to work out what doing *right and just by God* meant in their new world. The disciples were on, what one might term, a spiritual high. They had met with the risen Jesus on multiple occasions. He had reinvigorated their mission in a way that, weeks before, seemed impossible. The Holy Spirit had come in a new way, with an unexpected power, at Pentecost. The apostle Peter, so subdued and humbled, crushed even after Jesus' death, had become a new man and preached with power to the masses. Hundreds of people were coming to faith in Jesus in a way that resembled the earlier response to John the Baptist's ministry. There was a momentum in what was happening, a joy and relief amongst the disciples. God's plan was being worked out and all would be well. But would it? Had the disciples missed something?

In John's gospel, chapter 10, we have the well-known parables of the shepherd. Jesus, unambiguously, states that He is the True Shepherd, the True Doorway to life. The True Shepherd has the key to the front door, opens it and invites others to enter. Those who try to get in other ways are thieves and robbers whose intent is malicious. The key to having a relationship with the True Shepherd is four-fold, hearing His voice, listening to His voice, knowing how to discern what is not His voice and responding to His voice. In our Christian journey all of these aspects are just as vital for us today as they were at that time.

How do we **Hear His Voice**: When we begin the walk of faith we are like a deaf person suddenly given their hearing in mid-life. At first, all there is, is a cacophony of sound, a constant dissonance unlike anything they have ever known, a physical and sensual engagement with the senses. Navigating this overload requires listening: focus on a single key sound or pattern, usually the voice of the person assisting, and then slowly, through learning, appropriate sounds and their associated meaning. It isn't something that happens immediately but takes time and effort. We do it slowly over years from the moment of birth. Similarly, hearing Jesus' voice, His word, His message, is at first novel. It can take a while to break through the multiple confusing voices life

throws at us. Jesus speaks unlike any other person in history. World-wide Jesus is recognised as one of the greatest moral teachers that ever lived. His words are worth considering by anyone. But He is more than that, His very words are Truth itself. Hearing is the start but then there is listening.

**Listening to His voice:** Those who truly want to grow in faith don't just *hear* Jesus Words they listen to them. They make Jesus' voice the most critical one in their life, like the sheep following their shepherd. When there is only one primary voice to focus on, a singularity for our lives, everything else gradually comes into perspective. Intentional or not the key voice or voices we listen to have a significant influence on us. You will know people who have learnt multiple languages. They always have an accent in the language that is not their mother tongue. The accent is unintentionally learnt from their tutor, collateral learning if you like. We learn like this. The primary voice in our life is the one we emulate. For some people this is popular music, or TV, or the internet, but for the person of faith the primary and most significant voice speaking into their life will be the Lord. Hearing is the starting point, listening engages with what is heard and inculcates it into our lives. We are taught, disciplined and encouraged, or discouraged by what we truly listen to.

There was an old Scottish highland preacher frustrated by a staff member who never pulled his weight. One winter the snow was so deep the old worker was the only one who turned up for the Sunday service. The preacher let rip in the sermon, haranguing his singular congregation about laziness, doing one's duty and serving the Lord through honest work. As the worker left at the end of the service, he shook the preacher's hand and said, "Great service preacher, you really let them have it, shame they weren't here to hear it." He had heard the whole service but not listened. The sheep listen to their shepherd.

So to **Discernment**. The sheep know their shepherd's voice. They know it so well that, like a mother with a child, they would know that voice in the midst of a massive crowd. I love watching those wildlife documentaries about penguins. After weeks away getting food the female returns to her mate, one of millions of birds, and locates him by call. In a seething mass of millions of bodies all crying out, one mate can find their unique other. So too, if we are so familiar with the Lord's voice, with His Word, with His truth on a daily even hourly basis, then we will not be led astray by deceiving voices. The sheep listen to their shepherd alone, ignoring and avoiding the deceiver in their midst.

**Following His Voice:** Of course what then follows naturally is following: acting, doing. To hear, listen and understand but do nothing is like the spouse who sits on the couch and does nothing when their partner asks them to do something. They hear, they listen, they know just what is required of them but chose to do nothing. This rarely ends well. Nor does it in faith. The person of faith, when hearing the Lord's voice, does respond. Not always enthusiastically one might note, sometimes very enthusiastically, but respond they do because they know who is speaking. God always wants good for us. Responding helps us make sense of what we hear, to prove what we have learned and know. Faith demonstrates true understanding and engagement when we act in response to what we have listened to. Imagine sitting and watching cooking show after cooking show but never, ever trying to do anything yourself in the kitchen. Ok, so some of you are saying "but that's me". Say no more... You get a degree of understanding by listening and hearing, by seeing and observing, but that's nothing like actually doing.

Sometimes responding can be a struggle if we don't see a specific situation the same way. We do know that the shepherd always cares for the sheep and will bring about the

best outcome if allowed to. God speaks to us in many small ways – about our attitudes, our actions, the positive impact we have on others, the good we can do, the relationship He wants with us and many other things. Do we hear, do we listen and do we respond appropriately ... or do we listen and give in to other voices?

Well let's come **back now to our disciples in Jerusalem**. In the aftermath of all the significant events of Easter and Pentecost what or who were they listening to? What were they doing?

In this period of early church life Luke attests to the fact that miraculous signs and wonders were done through the apostles and in particular healing. This is akin to the first year of Jesus' ministry when He did the most significant number of healings and through them drew crowds of followers to hear His message. The miracles vindicated the source of His Word. Now the apostle's message, especially the sermon given by Peter, was similarly authenticated by the power of God. The outcome amongst the populace was one of religious awe and fear along with a stunning growth of the church to thousands in just days as an immediate result.

This unplanned, exponential rapid growth of the church created practical problems for the apostles. It is interesting to note that they, in line with their Jewish roots and what they understood they had learned from Jesus, did not separate their spiritual understandings from their social responsibility. We are told that the community held everything in common. There are several very natural reasons for this: the area was relatively poverty stricken. As the church grew and waited in Jerusalem their practical needs, especially for food, grew daily. Some had given up their livelihood to be with the community. Some, from all over the known world, had refused to return home after the Jewish celebration now intent on being part of the Jesus community. Why? Because they were awaiting Jesus' return. The concept that Jesus was not going to reappear any moment did not occur to them. They were waiting for Jesus. But He didn't reappear.

Interestingly, what we are going through at the moment is not dissimilar. At the start of the lockdown it seemed like it was just going to be a few weeks at best and then things would return to normal. Gradually the problems with a prolonged lockdown become, or have become, more apparent. When things drag on longer and longer, when people begin to recognise what they have given up or lost and things don't seem to change or progress, life gets harder, more intense, more practically problematic. When there is no real end date in sight people hope for the best, not able to go back nor go forward comfortably but increasingly irritable and frustrated. They need a plan. They need a real hope. They need to see progress. It is a tricky situation.

The apostles were rapidly immersed in such a situation. The community grew. In faithful generosity they gave ... more and more. From Acts 4 and 5 we can see this situation continued for some time. Only there was a problem. Jesus had not told them to do this or to stay in Jerusalem. In fact, we know from Luke 24:49 He had told them to wait in Jerusalem only until power had come upon them. Then they would be equipped to be His disciples unto the ends of the earth, what we call today the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. I love that old English word that is often used in translations – they were to “tarry” in Jerusalem, wait around until the empowerment was given, then get on with the job. But they hadn't. They had forgotten the fullness of what Jesus had said and they were waiting for Jesus to come back.

Yes, we can all do it. We can get so carried away with what seems good that we fail to carefully work through what God has already told us. We forget to check out the plan with the Master Builder before commencing work. We start the cake without looking at

the recipe assuming we can remember. Sometimes what we perceive as good may not be so good after all. So it was for the early church.

As the numbers grew and the community waited things became problematic. There wasn't enough food to go around. People had given up jobs and donated all they had to the common cause so there was no income coming in. Not all did this we note. Mary, we find later, still has a house and servants. People started arguing over food supplies and these arguments started to divide groups on racial grounds. Miracles were still occurring and when Ananias and Sapphira were struck down for attempting to lie to the Holy Spirit the wider community were in fear and stopped joining the fledgling church (Acts 5:13), even though people still came forward for healing.

The mission and witness of the church had gone from growing with miraculous power to a ragged community of people with a growingly desperate list of needs. Then their leaders were taken and put on trial. God can use even our disobedience, our stubbornness and hardness of heart, even our mistaken and misguided enthusiasm but it is far better if we start by truly listening and responding appropriately. Yes, the trial of the apostles would have some success, especially in terms of witness value. Yes, the re-allocation of food would lead to some structural arrangements in the church that we carry through to today. And yes, eventually, martyrdom would become one of the seeds of the ongoing growth of the church. But what had they missed and why was what happened less than ideal?

Previously, the apostles had not listened, had not comprehended, that Jesus would die and rise again. Now here again, they had not put two and two together. Jesus had also told them that their mission was to take the Good News of God's love and salvation, vindicated by the Cross and Resurrection, to the world, so that many souls could be saved. Because they missed the practical recognition that Jesus was not going to be back next week, and because this is what they expected, they ordered their lives wrongly. They had heard but they hadn't listened.

The consequences would speak for themselves. The church would struggle, people would be martyred, and growth stopped. It took the first persecutions of the church to break up the holy huddle and disperse them into the world to do what Jesus had instructed. The aim was good, the heart was positive, but the aim was off.

This is a good lesson for us today. It is not enough to feel we are doing good, it needs to be both effective and what God wants us to be doing. It is like giving a needy person on the street \$10 and then as soon as you are out of sight they use it to buy drugs. It might be harder to say no and then to get them something to eat, or to support a food bank, or a community meal but it brings a better result. What is a short term result? What is a long term result? Which is better do you reckon? The Lord gives us hearts to care, He also gives us wisdom to make good choices when we are listening carefully. Proverbs 16:1-3 tells us, **“To humans belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the proper answer of the tongue. All a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the Lord. Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and He will establish your plans.”** In the coming days and months we will need, individually and as a community, to continue to do good but critically, it needs to be in line with the Lord's heart and will and what He wants us to do. How do we balance competing needs to do lasting good? With prayer, a listening head and heart and with Godly wisdom. Amen.