

Acts 2: 42-47

Psalm 23

I Peter 2: 19-25

St. John 10: 1-10

Fourth Sunday of Easter Season 2023.

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“I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.” St. John 10: 10b

When we're in the midst of trouble in the *present*, we sometimes look back at an earlier time – with rose-coloured glasses... For example, in one of the parishes I served, Sunday School attendance in about 1952-1953 was recorded as having over 400 students. After the men and women who served during World War Two came home, almost all of them married and began having babies. The so-called “Baby Boom” of 1946 to 1963 or so meant that schools were bursting at the seams, and so were Sunday Schools... By the time I came to the parish, my 2 kids grew the Sunday School by about 25%...

When I was first there, there were a lot of memories of the “good old days,” when the parish hall was packed with Sunday School students... But it turned out that the “good old days” weren't always so good!... One older member who had been recruited as a Sunday School teacher years earlier confided in me that Sunday School was often chaos: The teachers had no training; organization was poor; the curriculum was more about memorizing doctrines than it was making disciples. When we dug into it, “the good old days” weren't as good as they seemed to be, when there were later challenges...

This isn't a new phenomenon: We are sometimes selective about what we remember from the past... Let's remember that God's ancient people were in slavery for about 400 years. When they were finally delivered from slavery, and travelled in the desert, in the Arabian peninsula, they discovered that food and water was scarce – and the people began to complain. They even began to murmur to one another that maybe slavery wasn't so bad after all! Exodus 16: 2-3:

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’

There are lots of reasons why we can be concerned about the world around us: There is a terrible new civil war in Sudan along with all the other wars; the economic system around the world is in turmoil; the natural world itself seems to be groaning under the impact of human destruction...

The Church is not exempt; the worldwide Church is facing significant challenges today... That might tempt us to look back – to think that some earlier golden age is what we need

to re-capture today... But that's not meant to be. We're called to be faithful *today*, in our present circumstances. We can't time travel back, or re-create the past (and the past wasn't as good as some of our memories might suggest)... God has created us to serve him *today*, and to pour his grace into our lives to live for him *today*...

I want to introduce you to a Christian leader in an earlier time – a time which many think was an easier age for the Church (but in fact, it was not). I'd like to introduce you this morning to Jeremy Taylor, who died in 1667...

Let's set the stage with what was happening in England in the early and mid-1600's... On the surface, it seemed to be a very good time to be a Christian! The Church filled every corner of English daily life. With the publication of the popular King James translation of the Bible in 1611, just about everyone who could read could have access to the scriptures. It was just a given – it was accepted without question – that Sunday was the day of rest and for worship. England was literally and in metaphor an island, with relatively little meddling from continental Europe and beyond...

But when we dig beneath the surface, all was not well... Quietly and often secretly, there were English people who remained loyal to the Roman Catholic tradition, who felt that the reforms of almost a hundred years earlier had gone way too far. On the other end of the spectrum, there were the Puritans, who felt very strongly that England had not gone nearly *far enough* to reform the Church... The Puritans became deeply suspicious of the king who was rather clumsily trying to hold it all together. Eventually, students of history recall that the Puritans became a political movement. In the crude justice of the day, King Charles the First was beheaded, and Oliver Cromwell and his associates tried to create a heavy-handed Christian state, getting rid of Christian bishops, and forbidding everyone from using the *Book of Common Prayer*, even as private devotions in their own homes!... Were these really the “good old days” for the Christian Church in England?... I think not...

It was into this wider cultural soup that Jeremy Taylor grew up as a young adult. Jeremy Taylor's balance of a great intellectual mind and deep practical sensitivity about the importance of family life, Christian devotions and pastoral care soon attracted the attention of the King. Jeremy Taylor eventually became a bishop. When King Charles the First became the target of the Puritans, Jeremy Taylor himself became suspect. Bishop Taylor was not put to death by other Christians, but he *was* banished first to rural Wales in the west, and then sent to the thankless job (at the time) to serve in rural Ireland. The Presbyterians hated him because he was a bishop. The Roman Catholic Irish hated Jeremy Taylor because he was English; they didn't understand well his language or his piety... He didn't have it easy...

Some of Jeremy Taylor's writings are too sharp for modern readers, but at other times, Bishop Taylor showed a profound and practical wisdom, to try and help ordinary Christians live out their lives in devotion to Jesus Christ...

To take just one example (perhaps reflecting on his own experience of leadership in the Church), Bishop Taylor wrote that leadership is part of being human – if you have a group of people gathered together, someone with the right leadership gifts needs to emerge – to guide the group the right way, under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ himself...

Sociology hadn't been invented yet. But Bishop Taylor observed a simple fact of human nature: Groups need leaders, and leaders will gradually emerge. Ideally, groups should have faithful, patient servant-leaders...

All leadership in the Church, of course, is under the perfect authority of the living God. It is the Triune God who has revealed himself, whom we aim to serve and to glorify... And yet, as the little girl said to her mother during a fierce thunderstorm, we also need someone with "skin on," to help us get through life's fierce thunderstorms... Christian groups – Christian congregations or parishes – need leaders, who themselves are fellow servants of Jesus Christ...

The Lord Jesus teaches about leadership, in today's gospel reading, from John 10... Jesus Christ says here, "I AM the door." That is, *I Am* the way in, to receive eternal life. There is a spiritual thief in this world, who seeks to steal and kill and destroy. In contrast, Jesus Christ loves all humanity, and desires us all to become one flock, in one pasture. "I came that they might have life," Jesus explains, "and have it abundantly..." God through Jesus Christ wants us to live out our destiny: To have abundant life in him for ever... We belong to the Church, the Body of Christ. Jesus Christ is our Head...

In the words of that great ecumenical document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, all of us – *all* of us, without exception – are *ministers*, under Jesus Christ, the great Good Shepherd... All of us are ministers... We are all called into ministry of some kind, beginning with our baptisms into the Church's membership. We all are to be lay ministers... But God calls some of us *out* of lay ministry, into ordained ministry in the Church... Some of us are called into particular forms of leadership...

In the Anglican Communion – like a number of other Christian denominations – some people are called out of lay ministry to serve as deacons, as servants; some of us are called to be priests of the Church; some of us are called to be bishops...

It is my privilege – beyond words – to serve as a priest in God's Church. I am called to a particular form of priestly ministry, to serve in leadership in parish ministry... I encourage you this morning – Live Out Your Calling... Most of us are called to some form of lay ministry, and that's all well and good. There's to be no hierarchy in ministry. The janitor being a fulfilled janitor is of the same status as a Metropolitan. There are all kinds of lay ministries... But if God is calling us out of *lay* ministry, to serve in some form of ordained ministry... don't ignore the Lord, or try to avoid it. If this is God's purpose for us, this is where we belong.

I also encourage us to pray for one another, that we will all correctly discern God's voice – the calling of the Good Shepherd, to serve him appropriately and faithfully for ever.

Let's conclude by saying together a prayer for this Sunday – Good Shepherd Sunday – as printed (on the screen and) in your service bulletin:

God our hope, your risen Christ commissioned leaders to make disciples of all nations, and baptize them to serve as a living testimony to his presence. Raise up in this Province vocations to holy orders – individuals who will love you with their whole hearts and gladly spend their lives making you known. Quicken wisdom in those charged with ministries of discernment or mentorship; and equip theological schools and faith communities in which vocations are encouraged and incubated, so your church, devoting itself to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers, may live as a faithful sign and instrument of your Reign, drawing the world to the One who is Lamb, Gate, and Shepherd, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.