

## SERMON FOR EASTER 4 | 03.05.2020

Acts 2: 42-end; 1 Peter 2: 19-end; St John 10: 1-10

**“Tell me, how are you feeling? Really?”** As a young priest, I was often put in my place by people who were older and wiser than I was. I might be wearing a dog collar but I had a lot to learn. On one occasion I made the mistake of saying to someone, *I know how you are feeling.* Without missing a beat she turned on me: *don’t be stupid,* she said, *how could you possibly know how I feel?* I can’t remember the exact circumstances – but I have never said that again.

**And yet... what is human flourishing about if we are not, at least at some level, trying to find out what other people are feeling, what they are seeing, what they are needing?**

**Sr Hilary Lyons was brought up in the very west of Ireland in the 1930s. As so many of her generation did, she entered a convent at the age of 18 and, before being sent to the Missions – in her case to Sierra Leone – she qualified as a doctor.**

In two short books, she tells the story of what it was like for a fresh-faced girl from Co Mayo to be thrust into this colonial outpost in West Africa, with absolutely no idea of what she was going to meet and armed only with her rudimentary medical training - and her prayer books! The word that flows throughout the narrative of those 40 years is ‘empathy’: learning to feel and to understand people so very different from herself, at the deepest level possible. It was an amazing journey.

**But it was often painful too, trying to see things from someone else’s perspective. On one occasion, full of Biblical rectitude, Sr Hilary persuaded a man to get rid of two of his three wives in a culture where polygamy was long established. The tale she tells is heartbreaking as we learn how the women (and their children) were banished from the village and then reduced to abject poverty. Hilary had simply failed to understand the way in which families worked in rural Sierra Leone.**

**In today’s Gospel, Jesus uses the picture of the shepherd and the sheepfold to tease out something we can so easily overlook - the connection between security and true empathy. Let’s start with the bit that is familiar.**

**The picture Jesus gives us is of some sheep, literally, penned up. The world is full of people, robbers and thieves, who want to prise the sheep out of their safe haven and kill them. The best place, the safest place for them is therefore inside that sheepfold. It’s not much fun being cooped up but at least they are safe.**

**But - as we know all too well in this period of isolation - they aren't 'free' and so they spend their time listening out for the voice of the familiar shepherd calling from outside the sheepfold. As soon as they hear his voice things change: they know that if they leave where they are, they will still be looked after - but they will be free to go and explore the world too. Isn't that what life is really about?!**

**Yet, as Jesus tells the story, we are bound to ask, given the thieves and robbers, even with Jesus leading them, are they really 'safe' outside that sheepfold?**

**In the book *Luminaries* that some of us are reading by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams reflects on two more victims of the Nazi regime in the 1940s, Edith Stein and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one a Jewish Christian nun and the other a Lutheran Pastor. We thought about a third victim, Etty Hillesum, last week. And there is a bit of each of their stories which inter-link.**

**For Edith Stein, her deep interest in what other people were doing and what they were thinking stemmed from much more than mere 'interest': she was fascinated by what made other people tick and she found that the more she understood them the more she loved them. Like Sr Hilary in Sierra Leone, she couldn't stop herself trying to work out what led people to talk in the way they did and to make decisions in the way that they did.**

**Brought up in the German philosophical tradition this line of enquiry took her closer and closer to what she called 'the edge'. It was, she said, as if she was standing on a cliff. If she went any further in understanding people she would literally fall over. And then what would she find? What was there, 'over the edge'?**

**To Edith Stein 'over that edge' was the place where we find God. Only when we have put our own interests to one side, abandoned our control of the situation and discovered how to fully love other people will we discover the overwhelming presence of God.**

**Stein believed that it was only when we were in complete empathy with the needs and desires of others (*being one in heart and mind* as the early Christians described it in our first reading from Acts) that the face of God would be revealed and the voice of the Good Shepherd be heard. She wrote: *There is a universal need for sympathy and help beyond the narrow circle of friends and family, rooted in the divine love for all who suffer and are overburdened.***

**But first one had to take the risk of leaving behind the security of the sheepfold. The sheepfold, far from being the haven we might all long for, represented a false retreat, a place of selfishness and immaturity. Jesus the Good Shepherd called from outside its walls, and his promise was not to provide total protection from harm but a journey of discovery in which he remained a constant presence, however hard the experiences we might have to cope with. And it was this conviction that led Edith Stein to her greatest test.**

**Despite the risks, the more she grew in love for her fellow Jews, the more determined she was not to use her Christian faith to evade the SS or the dreaded deportation order when it finally came. Indeed, as Etty Hillesum wrote in a letter, the sight of Edith Stein and her sister Gertrude - dressed in full nun's habits - caring for the other prisoners in a Jewish transit camp, made a deep impression on her. It was there in Westerbork, that Edith had 'fallen over the edge' and found her true vocation: caring for those destined for Auschwitz.**

**For Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, there was an equally stark choice. As war loomed in 1939, this brilliant young man was teaching in New York. Already out of favour with the Nazis, he could so easily have stayed put in the US and escaped all the turmoils his countrymen were going through.**

**But in his heart he knew what the image of the Good Shepherd was really about. He could not remain in the US and turn his back on suffering; nor could he stand idly by.**

**By August of that year he had sailed back to Germany and to a deep involvement with those opposed to Fascism. *This is how the truth makes us free*, he wrote in his diary. *Not free to do whatever we fancy at any given moment but free to be real. It is the freedom to be what we most deeply are.***

**Now I know this isn't the way we have normally thought about these words of Jesus about being the Good Shepherd; the idea that, safe in his sheepfold, we will be kept from harm and from the 'wolves' who are out to get us.**

**Actually I think what Jesus wants us to take on is the very opposite of that 'safety first' message. What he is inviting us to do is to take risks, to venture outside our comfort zones, to go the extra mile in caring for people on their own, to take the difficult decision at work that may lead to something really important emerging, perhaps giving more than we can afford to a charity which looks to us for help - and all the time knowing that Jesus will be there in the middle of those challenges to give us what we need when the going gets tough.**

**The truth is that whenever we listen faithfully to the voice of Jesus, we really have no idea where his call will take us. Once we have left the security of the sheepfold and what we find familiar – Mayo for Hilary Lyons, the convent life for Edith Stein or New York for Dietrich Bonhoeffer - we find ourselves being led closer and closer to ‘the edge’, where our empathy and love for other people reveals the face and the love of God - but often through experiences we would have preferred to avoid.**

**Here in the lives of these three extraordinary people it was their willingness to go wherever Jesus led which gave true meaning to their lives and turned their curiosity into compassion and their compassion into love - the place where they could find the truth of God for themselves.**

**Jesus’ offer, of course, remains the same. Whether it is to the early disciples in the Book of Acts, these 20<sup>th</sup> century men and women of faith or to us, he remains the truly empathetic ‘Good Shepherd’ who leads us out into pastures new. For, as he said, *I have come into the world so that you may have life, and have it to the full.* As the psalm says: *And with him beside me, my soul shall sing!***

***God of the prophets, you fulfilled your promise that your Son would suffer and then rise again: grow in us a love for your Word that with power from on high we may fill our days with praise and thanksgiving. Grant this through Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen.***