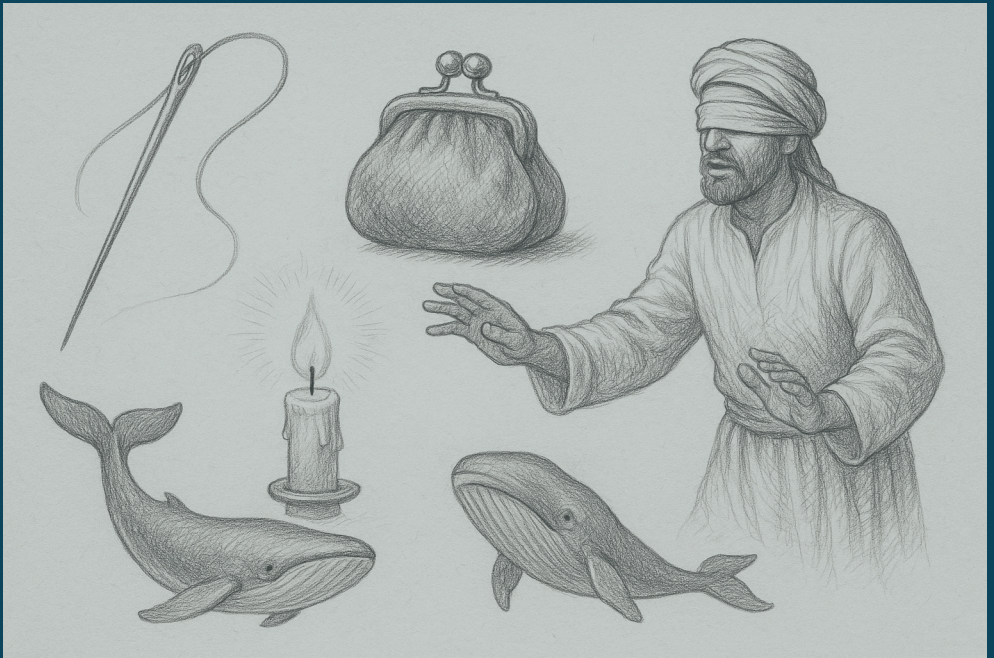


Breaking Open the Word

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
11th May, 2025



Hearing the Voice of the Shepherd

A weekly reflection and
sermon, with study and
prayer guides following the
RCL Lectionary

Dennis Webster



Revised Common Lectionary
Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 9.36-43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7.9-end

John 10.22-30

Book of Common Prayer (1662) Collect

Introduction

Reflection

Discussion Questions

Five Days of Meditation and Prayer

Almighty God,
who shewest to them that be in error
the light of thy truth,
to the intent that they may return
into the way of righteousness:
Grant unto all them that are admitted
into the fellowship of Christ's religion,
that they may eschew those things
that are contrary to their profession, a
nd follow all such things as are agreeable to the same;
through our Lord Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION

In his sermon "Voices of the Shepherd," Dennis explores how the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, influences lives and invites us into a mission beyond our comfort zones.

Using the transformations in the book of Acts, he highlights the call to listen to Jesus, emphasising that His voice leads us through challenges and unexpected paths.

The narrative focuses on pivotal figures like Tabitha, whose acts of compassion reflect Christ's love, and Peter, who learns to discern the Shepherd's voice through experiences that challenge his preconceived notions about purity and inclusion.

Through their stories, Dennis prompts us to consider how we embody the voice of the Shepherd in our own lives.

Dennis also delves into the quiet obedience of Simon the Tanner and the dramatic conversion of Saul, underscoring that every act of hospitality and every moment of personal transformation contributes significantly to God's mission.

He invites the congregation to recognise and respond to the Shepherd's call in their lives, reminding them that Jesus still speaks to each person with love and purpose.

The sermon encourages a reflective response to actively listen and follow the Shepherd, embracing a life characterised by love, mercy, and courageous mission.

Prayer Prompts

- Share any prayer requests.
- Ask God to help you recognise His voice this week.
- Pray for the courage to step outside your comfort zone and embrace those on the margins.
- Seek guidance in living out acts of mercy and compassion in your community.

God of Creation, breathe into us, made of clay,
your gift of life so that we, made in your image
may become your eyes, ears, hands and voice.

The Voice That Guides Us

We are irresistibly drawn to the imagery of Jesus as the Good Shepherd—a voice that intimately knows us, calls us by name, and leads us toward abundant life. It is a voice we associate with tranquillity, security, and assurance. Yet, the path upon which this Shepherd guides us is seldom predictable. It meanders through the realms of resurrection power, boundary-defying inclusion, audacious obedience, and courageous mission.

In the book of Acts, the narrative undergoes a profound transformation. Not through grandiose strategies or charismatic personalities, but because individuals hear and respond to the voice of Jesus in unforeseen ways.

Most of the action today transpires in the town of Joppa, presently referred to as Jaffa in

Israel. This locale is situated in an area that can be approximately defined as North Tel Aviv. In exploring Joppa, it is essential to spotlight one notable Patristic saint, namely Jonah. In establishing the context for our discourse on the call of the Good Shepherd, Jonah's significance and origins in Joppa cannot be overlooked.

The Lord summoned Jonah, yet he fled with remarkable haste to a vessel. He adamantly rejected the divine mandate to journey to Nineveh and offer salvation. We shall not linger excessively on the more dubious particulars of the ensuing events. Suffice it to say that after several days ensconced within the belly of a formidable leviathan, and subsequently being expelled upon a shore, he became far more receptive to the directive that had been imparted to him.

At least Jonah discerned the correct course of action on his second attempt. As we shall soon discover regarding Peter, who, while in Joppa, required matters to be executed in triplicate!

Let us attune our ears to this call.

I. Tabitha (Dorcas): A Life Influenced by the Shepherd's Voice

Text: Acts 9:36–43

A. A testament of mercy and Christlikeness

Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, was celebrated for her acts of mercy and her ministry to the vulnerable, particularly widows. Her life was not characterised by sermons, visions, or miraculous signs—but by the garments she crafted and the lives she transformed. Her death reverberated through her community, as she embodied the hands and feet of Jesus among them. She had undoubtedly heard the Shepherd's voice—and beyond mere auditory recognition, she had followed.

Her generosity and compassion were not mere random acts of kindness; they were the fruits borne from a life deeply rooted in Christ's compassion.

B. Resurrection as a sign of belonging

When Peter arrives, he is profoundly moved by the palpable love and grief surrounding her. He prays and then utters the command, "Tabitha, get up." This phrase resonates with Jesus' own words—"Talitha kum"—addressed to the young girl in Mark 5. This is not simply a replication of a miracle; it is a revelation: the Shepherd continues to call His sheep by name. And even death cannot silence His voice.

Application:

Are we living lives that authentically reflect the voice of the Shepherd? Would our absence leave a gospel-shaped void in our community? Does our daily existence resonate with His mercy?

II. Peter: Learning to Discern the Shepherd's Voice in a New Key **Text: Acts 9:43 - 10:33**

A. Following the Shepherd's example
In raising Tabitha, Peter follows in the footsteps of Jesus. Yet, he is not merely replicating miracles; he is being moulded, challenged, and prepared for what lies ahead.

B. Dwelling in tension: The Tanner's abode

Following the miracle, Peter resides with Simon the Tanner—a man regarded as ritually unclean due to his profession. For a devout Jew like Peter, this would have been uncomfortable, even unthinkable. However, the Shepherd is already broadening his understanding of sanctity and purpose. Prior to the vision materialising, the voice is already priming him through the simple gesture of hospitality.

C. A vision of redefinition

Peter's famous vision—unclean animals descending from heaven—signifies a crucial moment. The Shepherd's voice echoes once more: "Do not consider anything unclean that God has purified." This is not just about dietary regulations—it concerns individuals.

The Shepherd urges Peter to surpass his customs, presumptions, and limits.

Application:

Are we truly aligned with Jesus—or only with the influences of our upbringing, culture, and comfort zones? The Shepherd doesn't just console us; He pushes us. He might be urging us to dine with those we previously excluded, to welcome those we once branded as "unclean."

III. Simon the Tanner: Quiet Obedience in the Background **Text: Acts 9:43.**

Simon occupies but a solitary verse—but that verse carries significant weight. By welcoming Peter, he nurtures the holy space where God communicates. He doesn't preach or plan a revival; he merely opens his home. However, through this gesture, he enables one of the most pivotal moments in church history.

Application:

Never underestimate the deep importance of hospitality. One doesn't need a microphone to participate in the mission. At times, the Shepherd communicates through open doors, shared meals, and simple gestures of welcome.

IV. Paul (Saul): From Deafness to Obedient Discipleship **Text: Acts 9:1-19**

A. The persecutor hears the Shepherd.

Saul actively opposes Jesus, forcefully silencing His followers. However, the Shepherd does not abandon lost sheep. It is personal, penetrating, and deeply loving. Even in Saul's opposition, Jesus reaches out to him.

B. From blindness to proclamation.

Blinded by glory and truth, Saul enters a phase of silence and anticipation. Upon rising, he is completely transformed. The former Christian hunter becomes the most passionate supporter of Christ.

Application:

Some may feel they have strayed too far or resisted for too long. He calls not the deserving, but the willing. He summons not the righteous, but the lost.

Conclusion:

Hearing the Shepherd's Voice Today

- Like Tabitha, we are called to lives filled with practical love and compassion.
- Like Peter, we need to tune in to the voice that broadens our comprehension and leads us into unexplored areas.
- Like Simon the Tanner, we can silently aid God's work through acts of hospitality.
- Like Paul, we might need an interruption that changes our core.

Call to Response:

The Shepherd still calls. He calls by name, with tenderness—and with challenge. He does not only lead us beside still waters; He guides us into resurrection, inclusion, risk, and mission.

Are you listening? Will you follow?

May the voice of the Good Shepherd resonate profoundly within your heart.

May you follow Him into love, into mercy, into the abundant life of resurrection.

And may your existence serve as a testament that the Shepherd continues to speak and save."

What do you think it means to truly listen to the voice of the Shepherd in our lives?

- The sermon discusses how the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, shapes lives and calls us into mission.
- Can you share a specific moment when you felt you were listening to that voice? How did it guide you?

How did Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, demonstrate the compassion and mercy of the Shepherd?

- Tabitha's life was characterised by her kindness, especially towards the vulnerable, reflecting how she heard and followed the Shepherd's voice.
- How can we show kindness and compassion to those around us in our daily lives?

What new understanding or changes did Peter experience after his vision about clean and unclean animals?

- Peter's vision signified that the Shepherd urges him to rethink his customs and notions of what is acceptable.
- Are there any beliefs or assumptions that might need to be reexamined for greater inclusion or understanding?

In what way did Saul's encounter with Jesus transform him into a devoted follower?

- The sermon highlights how Saul's blindness and subsequent change made him a passionate supporter of Christ, illustrating how the voice of the Shepherd can completely change lives.
- Have you ever experienced a significant change in your values or beliefs? What led to that transformation?

How can simple acts of hospitality, like Simon the Tanner opening his home, play a significant role in God's work?

- Simon's welcome of Peter helped facilitate a pivotal moment in church history, showing the value of seemingly small contributions.
- What small ways can we practice hospitality in our homes or communities to align with the Shepherd's mission?

Walking Gently on Sacred Land

This five-day devotional will explore the sermon from this weekend in greater depth. We will explore the themes of doubt, faith, and peace from genuine encounters with Jesus.



Day 1

Acts 9:36-43

The story of Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, is a powerful illustration of the voice of the Good Shepherd. Tabitha lived a life characterised not by grand displays of faith but by acts of mercy and love towards the most vulnerable in her community. Her resurrection is not just a miracle; it signifies the profound impact of following the Shepherd's voice in our daily lives. We are called to reflect on how our deeds, rooted in Christ's compassion, contribute to healing and a life-transforming of those around us.

As we explore this theme, let us consider our own lives. Are we open to hearing the Shepherd's call and responding with actionable love in our communities? Just like Tabitha, we have the opportunity to shape lives with our kindness and compassion, leaving a gospel-shaped legacy in our absence.

- How am I reflecting the voice of the Shepherd in my daily actions?
- What gaps exist in my community that I can help to fill?
- How can I ensure I listen and respond to the needs of those around me?
- Pray for insight into the ways you can be more compassionate.
- Ask God for the courage to act on the needs you're aware of.

Day 2

Acts 9:43 - 10:33

Peter's journey to understanding the Shepherd's voice illustrates the delicate process of discernment and openness to change. Through the miracle of raising Tabitha, Peter learns not only to act

like Jesus but also to listen deeply, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide him into uncomfortable situations. Residing with Simon the Tanner—one deemed unclean—Peter's experience signifies breaking through social and cultural boundaries. This serves as a reminder for us: What boundaries do we need to dismantle to fully embrace the mission God has for us?

Reflecting on this theme, we are invited to challenge our preconceived notions and open our hearts to those who may not fit into our traditional moulds. The Shepherd's voice often calls us into unfamiliar territories and relationships. Are we ready for this transformative journey?

- What are the cultural or personal barriers I need to confront?
- How can I be more open to hospitality in my life?
- Am I truly aligned with Jesus, or merely my comfort zone?
- Pray for the ability to break through personal biases.
- Seek openness to invite those who are different into your life.

Day 3 Acts 9:43

Though Simon the Tanner occupies, his contribution is vital. By providing hospitality to Peter, Simon creates a sacred space where God's work can flourish. His actions remind us that we need not be in the spotlight to impact God's kingdom significantly. Often, through simple gestures of welcome, we can participate in something much grander than a solitary verse in Scripture than ourselves.

This teaches us the importance of everyday obedience. Each act of hospitality, each moment spent in communion, has the potential to connect us more to the Shepherd's mission. Are we opening our homes and hearts to receive God's calling? This teaches us the importance of everyday obedience. Each act of hospitality, each moment spent in communion, has the potential to connect us more to the Shepherd's mission. Are we open our homes and hearts to receive God's calling?

- How might my home be a space for God's presence?
- What act of hospitality can I extend this week?
- Am I willing to serve even in the background?
- Pray for opportunities to practice hospitality.
- Ask God to reveal ways you can serve behind the scenes.

Day 4 Acts 9:1-19

Saul's transformation from persecution to discipleship serves as a profound reminder of the Shepherd's relentless pursuit of lost sheep. Despite Saul's opposition, Jesus reaches out to him personally, demonstrating that no one is beyond redemption. This act of grace invites us to reflect on our own lives and consider the depths of God's love that calls us out of our darkness.

As we ponder this theme, we are compelled to recognise that transformation often requires an interruption. Many of us may need to be shaken from our complacency to see God's truth. Are we prepared to be transformed and to embrace our new identities as followers of Christ?

- What aspects of my life need to change to align with Christ?
- In what areas might I be resisting God's call?
- How can I embrace my new identity in Christ?
- Pray for strength to embrace transformation.
- Could you ask for guidance to let go of past resistance?

Day 5 Acts 10:34-48

As we conclude this devotional series, we reflect on the profound challenge of listening to the Shepherd's voice today. Just as Tabitha, Peter, Simon, and Paul were called to transformative missions, we are also summoned. The Good Shepherd leads us to peaceful waters and compels us into a life of purpose, inclusion, and mission.

This call urges us to be engaged in practical love, to step outside our comfort zones, and to listen for his voice in our daily circumstances. Are we aware of how He continues to speak to us, inviting us to follow his steps of mercy and grace?

- Am I intentional about listening to God's voice in my life?
- What actions can I take to live out my faith more actively?
- How is God calling me to serve those around me?
- Pray for clarity in understanding God's call.
- Reflect on opportunities to take steps of obedience in faith.

End notes and further reading

Sacra Pagina:
Paul's Press)

The Gospel of Luke (St
The Gospel of Matthew
The Gospel of John

The following authors as featured at
The Worship Cloud

www.theworshipcloud.com

N. T. Wright,
Jane Williams,
P James Woodward,
Paula Gooder
Mark Pryce,
David Perry

Rev Dr Andrew McGowan: Andrew's
Version: <https://substack.com/@abmcg>

¹Immersed In Christ: April 2015. <https://immersed-in-christ.blogspot.com/2015/04/>

² Dickson, J. R. (2024). Textual Triads:
The Identification and Justification of an
Apocalyptic Literary Form. <https://doi.org/10.70623/EXEJ9876>



Brabarlung Totem

This is produced on
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