

## Being Vulnerable 4<sup>th</sup> of Easter 2

Acts 9:36-end; John 10:22-30

*Jesus ministry was drawing to a head. At the end of chapter 8 in John's gospel we read "At this, they picked up stones to stone him"; and in the very next verse after our reading today, John records "Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him." Within a very short time, they will have their victory, Jesus will be hanging on the cross.*

*So it would be a mistake to read this gospel account as some benign theological reflection; a debate amongst Jewish scholars who relished wrestling with the scriptures.*

**John** presents a very calm scene. Jesus is walking in the temple courts. It's winter, and he is here for Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication. It was a moment of heightened zeal as the Jews were here to celebrate the re-dedication of the temple some 200 years earlier, after it had been profaned by gentile occupiers. *Think perhaps of some of the heightened tension around the traditional Republican or Unionist marches in Northern Ireland.*

**This** suggests that "The Jews who were gathered round him" were not so much there to learn as to accuse; more a menacing mob than an attentive class. There perhaps to find the excuse they need to bring him down – to rededicate the temple after the profanities they believe he has uttered in these very courts. "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly!"

By any human standard Jesus is very vulnerable. But Jesus doesn't back down – he confronts the issue, he confronts his accusers, he speaks truth to power. He tries to open their eyes, to wake them up, to shake them out of their "we're right, you're wrong" attitude. "You do not believe, because you are not my sheep." I guess they would agree with that, but he goes on to claim of his sheep that "The Father, who is greater than all, has given them to me." In other words, they are not God's sheep either! Now that is provocative! Then he says "The Father and I are one." No wonder they picked up stones to stone him.

Then at the centre of his words, Jesus says "My sheep follow me." To me this is a call to practice the same vulnerability in our own lives that Jesus practiced in his

life. He calls his followers 'sheep'. Sheep are amazingly vulnerable creatures. They are docile, prone to getting lost, defenceless against attack, valuable enough to be rustled away, born to be sacrificed or slaughtered. And yet, and yet these sheep have a shepherd who will lay down his life to keep them safe. And yet these sheep are protected in secure hands from which no one can snatch them away. We are his sheep, and his sheep can risk being vulnerable because they are secure in His hands.

Here I find the call to be vulnerable; the call to trust God with our vulnerability. It seems to me to be a key part of what Jesus means when he says "Follow me". If this is so, then being vulnerable, increasing our dependence on God and not on ourselves, is a really important part of developing our relationship with God.

What might this vulnerability look like? Vulnerability is when we are no longer in control, no longer sure of what might happen next. Vulnerability is when we risk our reputation, when we risk failing. Christian vulnerability is when we do this to follow Jesus; when we place our vulnerability in his hands; when we learn to let go and to let God.

*I find everyone in our reading from Acts to be vulnerable in different ways. Time doesn't permit us now to study Dorcas lying dead; the widows in their weeping; or the helpless disciples desperately sending out for Peter. All are vulnerable in their own ways. Perhaps you'd like to explore how when you get home today?*

**Peter** was also very vulnerable. Can you imagine how Peter might have felt when the request arrived: "Tabitha is dead – please come and bring her back to life!" He's supposed to be the leader, the one Jesus re-instated. He's supposed to know what to do. Would it be easier to say 'No' and deny the power of God? He's the one who has been preaching the resurrection of the dead. What if he says 'Yes' and nothing happens – what then – would his faith prove a sham, would the church collapse? It is in our vulnerability, when we are beyond our own resources, that we create the space for God to act.

In his vulnerability, in the pressure of the situation, Peter creates that space. He ushers the widows out of the room, kneels down and prays. He enters God's presence, seeks God's will, listens to the shepherd's voice. Perhaps in this moment, kneeling beside the corpse of Tabitha, he remembers Jesus words over a

little girl “Talitha Koum” – little girl get up. That moment of assurance, that moment of understanding, that to be a disciple means to follow Jesus – to do what Jesus would do, and to say what Jesus would say. That moment when despite all human instinct, you can know with quiet confidence what you must now do. And so Peter says, not “Talitha Koum” but “Tabitha Koum” – Tabitha, get up.”

How Peter must have felt as she opened her eyes. How he must have known that this could not have happened unless he had chosen to be vulnerable.

So how can we enter that place of vulnerability? How can we create that space in which we can listen to his voice and allow God to act, and so experience his blessing in our lives? How can we encourage one another to be vulnerable too?

Here are just three suggestions, addressing our worship, our witness and our wellbeing. Three “W”s if you like.

Firstly vulnerability in worship: Could we get beyond the security and comfort of our fixed liturgy, and become vulnerable by allowing those carefully crafted words to sink deep into our heart and mind – what do they say, how are they speaking to me, how dare I respond? Could we perhaps offer to serve in some capacity on a Sunday?

*I remember at my previous church being nudged to ask a particular lady if she would read the following Sunday. She looked horrified! But to her credit she promised to think about it. I quoted from Joshua “Be strong and courageous for the Lord your God is with you.” When she got home she couldn’t find her Bible to look up the reading. So she picked up her daughter’s Bible, and a piece of paper fell out. It read “Be strong and courageous for the Lord your God is with you.” The following Sunday she read in church for the first time. It’s been great to see how her faith has grown since!*

*Or could we encourage, welcome and celebrate moments of change? I was delighted when David asked us to join hands for the Peace on Easter Sunday; and when Peter stepped into the role of Cantor to lead us in an unaccompanied hymn. They were both moments of great vulnerability for David and Peter, but also moments that opened us up to God and each other in different ways.*

**Secondly** vulnerability in witness: We heard last week of “Thy Kingdom Come”, and the acts of witness that our local churches plan for the mornings of 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> June. Christian people are needed to be out there in the streets of Bookham inviting passers-by to receive prayer. Others will be in the church-yard providing refreshments, and still others praying with people who come. For most of us that would sound pretty scary, but it is also a wonderful opportunity to choose to be vulnerable for the sake of God’s Kingdom. Could this be the year when you can say ‘Yes’ to God’s call to be his witnesses in Bookham?

Thirdly vulnerability in wellbeing: We need to consider both Asking and Responding. Perhaps there is something that you generally keep private, but really would love prayer for – could you make yourself vulnerable enough to ask? Perhaps you could ask a close friend, or post a note in the prayer box. Then there is the vulnerability to respond. Could you pray with that friend and not just for them? Could you train to join a prayer ministry team, and offer yourself to pray for others. If so, I’d be delighted to hear from you!

*I was privileged in Romania to pray for many people. There they will often end a service with a time for prayer ministry. One time, a widow arrived stooped and exhausted. She wanted prayer for better sleep and the healing of her back pain. Out of that sacred listening space God prompted me to ask about her son. He was a reprobate, living at home and causing her trouble. As I prayed for her heart to open up once more in love towards her son, it seemed like the weight was lifted from her, the dark bags went from around her eyes, her stoop disappeared, and she left some two inches taller with hope and joy in her heart. Being vulnerable to God can make a world of difference, whether we are asking or responding.*

*Perhaps our church could become known as a centre for prayer ministry – who knows – vulnerability is all about following where God leads, rather than leading where we expect God to follow.*

**These** are just three suggestions. There are many other ways and opportunities to be vulnerable as we respond to Jesus call to “Follow me”. Let’s create that sacred space where we can listen to his voice, where God can act in our lives and in the life of his church. Let’s be vulnerable. Let’s learn to let go and to let God.

Amen.