

Fourth Sunday of Easter: 3rd May 2020

John 10:1-10, Acts 2:42-47, 1 Peter 2:19-20

One of the distinctive features of John's Gospel is its record of seven 'I am' sayings of Jesus. Jesus refers to himself as the: bread of life, light of the world, door, or gate for the sheep, good shepherd, resurrection and life, way, truth and life, and the vine. In different ways these are all intimate images that convey not just something about who Jesus was, but about his purposes for us.

Each year the gospel reading on the fourth Sunday of Easter is taken from the 10th chapter of John's Gospel, which contains two of those images, both connected with shepherding: the gate or gatekeeper of the fold and the 'good' shepherd. Not surprisingly therefore this Sunday is often referred to as 'Good Shepherd Sunday'. Still in the Easter season, it shifts our attention from accounts of resurrection appearances to the *person of Jesus* and his relationship with all who follow on after him.

John refers to these words as 'figures of speech', so we need to be careful not to interpret the images too literally. But they would have had resonance with Jesus' first hearers because they drew on images that were familiar in everyday life of the time. Sheep and goats were essential to sustaining life and shepherding a common occupation. It is not an image that we see every day, but I hope you will forgive me if refer again to a place where it is still an everyday sight, and an image that readily comes to my mind when I read this part of John's Gospel.

In Kagera, it is normal to see goat boys, hired to lead goats to pasture and care for them, returning them to their owners at the end of the day. Goats are a precious commodity in that culture, not just for sustaining life, but a means of economic survival. These boys know where to take them for food and sometimes must negotiate rocky and difficult paths. It may look like their attention is elsewhere, but they are always alert to danger and can call the flock back with a shout or whistle because the goats know their call. Personally, I cannot tell one goat from another, but the boys can tell whose goats they are even by their bleat and as night begins to fall, always make sure they get them back to the right homes.

It is an image easy enough for us to visualise, but the point is the qualities of care, protection, familiarity and trustworthiness that are displayed as they lead the flock, rather than the activity itself. When Jesus spoke these words, he was speaking directly to the Pharisees of the quality of the relationship God wants and offers to his people. The Pharisees had openly challenged his identity and authority to heal a man blind from birth. They probably would have known their scriptures well enough to understand, had they chosen to, that Jesus was using sheep and shepherd as metaphors for people and leaders. The Old Testament contains many references to the people being God's flock, perhaps most clearly in Ezekiel (34:31): "You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign Lord." And God had harsh words for the leaders who were often referred to as shepherds of the people, but who failed in their responsibilities to care for them. God condemned them as "false shepherds" who enriched themselves at the expense of the sheep, and promised: "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep" and will feed them on "rich pasture" and "with justice".

By inference Jesus likened those leaders of his day to thieves or robbers who had no concern for the welfare of the sheep, whereas he, as the Good Shepherd, is the one who goes before them, leads them and knows them intimately, even to being willing to lay down his life for them. Some scholars suggest his use of the image of gate would have brought to mind that a shepherd might physically create the door or gate by lying down across the entrance, putting himself at risk to protect the sheep. But in speaking of himself as the gate, Jesus was also speaking of the only true way into the fold of God's kingdom. It was also the only way out to life-giving pasture, and again, it is the qualities of self-giving, protecting and sustaining that are more important to understand than the image.

There is a second image I am reminded of from the culture in Kagera. It is a less common sight, but when cattle are being moved around, they too are usually led by young hired hands. And following the cattle there will be one or two sheep or lambs. There it is a traditional belief that the presence of the sheep will protect the cattle from predators. They are there in effect as potential sacrificial sheep to protect and save the rest.

This is very physical image, and as we are reminded in the Invitation to Confession in this Easter Season, 'Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed for us...', leads us again to ponder the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross, when the Good Shepherd *did* lay down his life for his sheep. It reminds us of the 'physicality of our faith', words used by the Sub Dean at St Albans Cathedral preaching last week. She had been reflecting on one of the things she misses most in this time of lockdown - human touch. Many of us will know exactly what she meant, having been unable to touch or be touched by anyone for several weeks now. She said "Christians are made for touch, and smell, and companionship and love. - because that is what Jesus was all about. Ours is a God who came close, who laid hands on the sick, who wept with the bereaved, and who gave his body for us....".

Jesus' relationship with his flock, was a physical and an intimate life-giving, sacrificial relationship. In the resurrection experiences there was the invitation to Thomas to touch, the walking alongside the two travelling to Emmaus, the sharing of a meal on the beach, his commission to Peter to feed my sheep, and the promise to be with us wherever we are and wherever we go. The one who was prepared to – and did - lay down his life for the flock, laid it down so that we might have abundant life, *and also* commissioned us to feed his sheep.

A little later in that conversation in which Jesus spoke of being the gate, he spoke again of laying down his life for the sheep and then of having other sheep to bring into the one fold, one sheep, one shepherd, all known by name. These were words of purpose for us. Jesus did not die on the cross just so we could stay safely hidden in the fold. The Good Shepherd also leads us out to bear witness in the world – following his example, listening to his guiding voice, assured of his promise to be with us wherever we go.

It is no co-incidence therefore, that this 'Good Shepherd' Sunday is also is also marked as Vocation Sunday. On this day we are especially urged to pray that the Church may be provided with the leaders needed to do its work of spreading the Gospel. And how much we need leaders of vision and integrity in these days. But vocation is not just about priests and leaders. Every single one of us has a vocation. We are all called by virtue of our baptism into God's ministry and mission, and there are many paths open to us to serve him in our daily lives, in our work, in our homes, in our prayer and in our action even in these unusual and restrictive times. Each one of us has a part to play. Each is called to be part of God's vision of a world made whole, a world made new.

Our task is to live in the world as if we really believe that Jesus the Good Shepherd is the way the truth and the life. We have to live as if we really care that others should come to know his name and hear his voice. We begin where we are, knowing we need not fear for there is nowhere the Good Shepherd who calls us has not already gone and nowhere where we go alone.

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