

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A

Acts 2:42-47 (Psalm 23) 1 Peter 2:19-25, John 10:1-10

The “I am” message from Jesus in today’s gospel reading is not “*I am the Good Shepherd*” but “*I am the gate for the sheep*”. Of course, this doesn’t have the ring of confidence that “*I am the Good Shepherd*” has. So, it challenges us to drill down into what he means.

Of course, Jesus is warning the Pharisees not to create alternative gates for the sheep into the sheep pen, alternative ways into God’s kingdom. Doing so would be to poach the sheep.

The sheepfold at the time was a continuous high wall that enclosed the sheep and kept them safe from predators and cosy and warm together inside. The wall would have a gap in it for the sheep to go in and out. And at night this gap would be guarded by the shepherd or a hired servant. Some say, although this is disputed, that this person would sleep lying across the gap in the wall to keep the sheep in and predators out.

But I’m not sure that this image really fits with verse 9 where the sheep go in and out through the gate.

So, what is the sheepfold for us? Jesus is obviously not talking about four-legged woolly creatures but about people. And the sheepfold for these sheep is the church. Not the physical building of bricks and mortar but the people of God’s kingdom who are in relationship with Christ Jesus.

And we see an illustration of relationship in this parable. The sheep know the shepherd’s voice; they follow him only and no other. They relate to him.

The Shepherd King David enjoyed such a relationship. “*The LORD is my shepherd*” he wrote in Psalm 23. Almighty God, Jehovah, is my shepherd. It is intimate and personal. The next verses of Psalm 23 are a testimony to that relationship. Provision, rest, refreshment, guidance, comfort, safety and abundance all arise out of this relationship.

But a sheepfold is not a dwelling for a solitary sheep, but for a flock. We tend to think, perhaps like David, of our individual relationship with Jesus. And that is right. Jesus says, “*Whoever enters through me will saved/will be safe.*” It’s an individual decision.

There is an initial – even an ongoing – individual requirement to respond to the saving love of Jesus by accepting his way and his forgiveness. Not going our way, but his. We are to be individual followers of Jesus. But at the same time, we are part of a flock, the church.

There are two fields behind my house where the shepherd often pastures his sheep with gates into them. It is fascinating to watch the sheep.

Suddenly one or two will start moving purposely across the field to the gate for no apparent reason that I can see. Then most of the others follow at pace so as

not to miss out! Just one or two have the sense to stay eating and wait for the shepherd.

One day recently walkers must have left the gate open between the two fields because about 20 sheep moved into the empty field directly behind me and then stood there looking back wondering why the others didn't follow.

After a while they went back. This happened twice. (With hindsight I should have gone and shut the gate after they returned to the rightful field the first time!)

Sheep need a shepherd. They can't manage effectively on their own. Most of us will have seen a sheep or two who have gone their own way and escaped from the field into a road or somewhere else where they are in danger.

Like the woolly sheep we are not to follow alone. We are part of a flock. In relationship to one another as well as to the Shepherd. Our reading from Acts is an illustration of the flock relating together. There is safety in being part of the flock because we can together discern where Jesus is leading. The LORD is our shepherd. He leads the flock. In the darkest valley his rod and his staff keep us safe.

There is danger in going it alone; we can drift away from Jesus without even realising it, as the writer to the Hebrews warns us. (Hebrews 2:1) We hear and listen to our own voice and not the Shepherd's.

But there can also be danger in being part of a flock. Danger because we can follow one another like sheep, rather than follow the Shepherd.

And often this is easier. We need to hear our Shepherd's voice, and that can be hard.

But we do need to be able to hear his voice and we need to know in which direction he is leading. Although not necessarily the destination.

Now here we encounter a difficulty that woolly sheep do not have. We cannot see the Shepherd and we cannot physically hear his voice. Following can be difficult.

What does it mean to follow Jesus anyway? We call ourselves Jesus followers but what does that mean?

Actually, I find it difficult to convey in words the essence of following Jesus and I don't think that I have fully grasped it either.

It is too easy to make it synonymous with alignment with the values Jesus displayed. "What would Jesus do?" as the American slogan goes. But does that really encompass it?

It's good stuff but does it in itself describe a follower? Describe someone on a journey with another, someone who is moving ahead?

Someone who has set self aside and is so totally satisfied with Jesus that they cannot bear to be away from where he is, from what he is doing? In the words

of former Archbishop Rowan Williams “seeing what God is doing and joining in.”

That requires a more intimate knowledge of Jesus. It means seeing what he is doing. It means hearing his voice. Do we recognise the voice of Jesus when he speaks to us? Or is that for other people? Do we make opportunity to hear? When did we last sit down, or spend time on a walk, and deliberately listen for what Jesus would say to us? When did we last have a two-way conversation with him? When did we last hear?

And this is not just individual; we are a flock. When did we together last seek to hear God’s voice, God’s direction? Does the Vestry collectively spend time seeking the voice of Jesus, or the Ministry Team? (I can tell you the answer to the last question; I don’t recall that we have ever done so.)

I know why we don’t of course, apart from being too busy. Either we don’t expect him to speak to us or we don’t expect to be able to hear. But Jesus says “*My sheep hear my voice.*” (John 10:27)

There is another factor to throw into the mix. It’s where we started: Jesus is the gate. It is through Jesus that we go in and out, following him.

Speaking of a time after the resurrection when Holy Spirit would be given to believers Jesus said (John 14:20) “*On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.*” Strangely the gate of the sheepfold is within! “*You are in me, and I am in you.*”

If we maintain a close relationship with Jesus through his Holy Spirit within us, individually and collectively, then our going out and our coming in will inevitably be done following him. As Paul writes (1 Corinthians 2:16) “*we have the mind of Christ*”.

It is an awesome responsibility to carry the gate of the sheepfold within us and hence imperative that we maintain a close relationship with Jesus. “*My sheep hear my voice.*”

But if we do it promises a great outcome – that of abundant life! Amen

Chris Shaw 30 April 2023