



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Fourth Sunday of Easter

readings: [Acts 2.42-end](#), [1 Peter 2.19-end](#), [John 10.1-10](#)

30 April 2023

In our Gospel this morning, Jesus uses different but related metaphors to speak of himself which are at one and the same time both very familiar and a little confusing. He describes himself both as the shepherd, and as the gate of the sheepfold. Is he the gatekeeper as well? Not quite sure. He refers to the existence of strangers and thieves and bandits, but Jesus doesn't specify exactly who they are, though the fact that he is addressing the Pharisees is perhaps a bit of a clue. The one thing about which we can be completely sure is that we are the sheep.

It is easy to get carried away with the romance of this idyllic pastoral scene. A quintessentially English picture of lambs skipping playfully in the meadow and the smell of freshly cut grass on a bright and sunny spring day, with sheep bleating gently in the background. This, what we would call, traditional pastoral scene somehow has the ability to stimulate our imaginations. Perhaps it has something to do with our roots as a society, where sheep and green fields were very much a part of everyday life. Of course, in Derby, we don't have to go very far into our beautiful county before this is not too far away from our experience. The image of a shepherd caring for their sheep still seems one of the easiest ways to express our care and concern for each other.

But let's be careful. The reputation of shepherds in 1st century Palestine was pretty dubious. Shepherds are sometimes depicted as the lowest of the low - not just on the economic spectrum, but viewed as ruffians more akin to the thieves and bandits in our gospel reading than upright members of society. Such, arguably, for example, were the shepherds who visited the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. The remnant of society who were the first to visit the infant Jesus. They lived outside the town in the shepherds fields below which is generally where the upright citizens preferred to keep them. If they came into town the residents locked their doors.

And what of us as the sheep? Well, not too much of a cliché, I think, to suggest that on the whole they are regarded as pretty stupid animals. To follow like sheep is normally regarded as a criticism for following the crowd in an unthinking way. Sheeple is the derogatory term we use. "All we like sheep have gone astray," if you want to start humming along to Handel's Messiah (we're hearing a different bit of Handel's Messiah later in the service). Quite likely to get themselves caught in a bush, or to believe they are safe if their head is on the verge side while their back end is still sticking out in the road.

So let's not get too romantic or sentimental about the imagery. But perhaps we can be too cynical as well. Always on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, in our three year cycle of readings, we hear a section of John chapter 10 - one of Jesus's discourses around his 'I am' sayings.

I am the bread of life.

I am the light of the world.

I am the true vine.

....and so on.

Our first hymn this morning was a reflection on the I am sayings. In the gospel reading next week we will hear, 'I am the way, the truth and the life.'

Here, I am the gate. And in the verse following this morning's gospel, 'I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep' in contrast to the hired hand who in the face of danger abandons the sheep and runs away.

So perhaps the reprobate image of shepherds was founded more upon the reputation of hired hands than the conscientious shepherd of the sheep. When Jesus says I am the 'Good Shepherd' perhaps the emphasis

should be as much on the word 'good' as it is on the word 'shepherd'. When Jesus refers to the Good Shepherd 'laying down his life' for the sheep, he meant 'laying down' literally. The reason the same person can be the shepherd and the gate is that in that society the shepherd himself would lie down in the gateway to the sheepfold at night in order both to keep the sheep in and any predators out. Hence he is both the shepherd and the gate. The shepherd laying in the gateway was not just about keeping predators out but about stopping the silly sheep from wandering off. They need protection as much from themselves as from any third party danger.

The image of Christ the Good Shepherd, then, is one to think about carefully. Despite being regarded in polite society as a disreputable occupation, the prevailing biblical images of shepherds and shepherding nevertheless paint them as people of care, comfort, bravery and sacrifice. Psalm 23 which we sang a few minutes ago, is a poem of simple faith and trust. Like sheep who have faith in their shepherd, our faith rests in the goodness and mercy of God. The poetry seems to strike just the right balance between the ups and downs of life's course.

The God of peace and tranquility, who we can discover in the joy and delight and contentment of nature and human relationships:

He will make me lie down in green pastures and lead me beside still waters.
He will refresh my soul.

But also God of strength and comfort, who we can discover in times of deep and dark sorrow and despair:

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:
for you are with me,
your rod and your staff comfort me.

Many of us, perhaps, will recall memories of reflecting on God's gentle presence, or being carried through difficult circumstances. And when we have been a bit foolish, misread a situation or got ourselves into a tricky position, then perhaps we can remember also that sense of God gently leading us back on track.

But let's go back to the sheep. The sheep who need protecting not just from others but also from themselves. A bit like us. Yes, it feels good to be safe in the sheepfold under the shepherd's protection. But note the shepherd doesn't just keep them in there indefinitely. He leads them out as well to find pasture outside the sheepfold. Jesus's role as the Gate is both protecting and liberating. The gate through which the sheep both come in and go out. And notice, that unlike traditional shepherding in our own society, where the shepherd walks behind them, gathering them from behind, here the shepherd leads them out.

Our readings says:

When he has brought out all his own, He goes ahead of them
And the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

So, if we push the imagery further and see the sheepfold as in some sense representing the Church. Well, yes it can be a place of safety and comfort and solace, but it is a place from which ultimately we derive support and encouragement, and then we go out.

But, if Christ is to be the pattern for our life, our calling shifts subtly from being just silly sheep who need taking care of, to striving to be shepherds in the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. Having a care for those in danger in our world. Having compassion for those who are for whatever reason fearful about life. Being responsive to those in need. And, as the gate, we might be vehicles through which others find pasture. We might reflect on those who for us have guided us on the way of faith, cared for us, encouraged us, protected us. Those who like shepherds have looked out for us And then reflect on how maybe, we might be those things to others too. It is well acknowledged that often a major factor in bringing a person to a position of faith is under the influence of a person of faith whom they already know and trust. Who is there among your circle of acquaintance for whom you can be that person?

Not by being in someone's face all the time, but simply by being ourselves, fashioning ourselves according to the person of Christ who is both the Good Shepherd and the Gate.

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