

21st April 2024 – John 10:7-18 (Psalm 23) ‘I am the Gate & I am the Good Shepherd’

On the second Sunday of 2017, we were about to start the 9.30am service at St Mary’s, when one of our welcomers came and found me urgently. ‘Come outside, you’ll want to see this,’ they said. So I hustled out and watched one of the more unusual sights I’ve seen in my 11 years here. Running along the road, and just passing the churchyard gate, were about 50 sheep.

We had no idea where they had come from or where they were going. I don’t think they had any idea where they were going either! There was great excitement – some wag commented that our flock had swelled considerably that day. But anyway we delayed the start of our service to work out what on earth we were going to do with them.

For lack of a better idea, we decided to corral them in the school car park over the road from the church, and try and find out who the farmer was. A few willing souls stood on sentry duty. It actually took about 2 or 3 hours to get hold of someone by which time, the grass verges around the car park had certainly had a good trim from 50 grazing sheep, and the ‘hired hands’ were very cold. By lunchtime, the sheep were safely back in a nearby field.

What’s the moral of this story? ‘Never leave your gate open’ would be one of them. But more simply, **sheep need a shepherd**. Look what happens when a large flock is left to its own devices.

Jesus tells us today: ‘I am the good shepherd.’ Or to make it more personal: **‘I am *your* good shepherd**. I know you and you know me. You know my voice, you know that life is better with me, because my life is dedicated to you.’ In these uncertain times we need the reassurance of that voice perhaps now more than ever. To know that we have a good shepherd leading us through the chaos, one who is totally dedicated to us, who walks with us and will never leave us, who comes to meet us where we are.

And **our shepherd ultimately means to give us life – life in all its fullness**. The Greeks had two different words for ‘life’ – *bios* and *zoe*. ‘Bios’ means physical existence – simply being alive, breathing. ‘Zoe’ is real life – spiritual life, wellbeing, wholeness. This is the word Jesus uses here when he says that his purpose for us is abundant life – abundant *zoe*. This is the kind of life we are wired for: it’s built into our DNA, because we are made in God’s image, so therefore we long for the same things God already has within himself. Even those who would not profess our faith long for deep relationship, strong community, fruitful lives and to rejoice in the beauty of our world – things which are central to bearing the image of God, the source of *zoe* life.

To really know this kind of wholeness, this abundant *zoe* life, we need to receive it from the one who made it – the Good Shepherd himself, Jesus Christ. By God’s grace we can all experience it in part: but the fullness is only found in Christ. He is the gate, he’s the way to know this true life, he’s the one who can plant it deep in our hearts. Without him, we get the temporary ‘hired hands’ version, not the real thing.

Which brings us to a small but vital point – some of you may be thinking – why are we covering two ‘I Ams’ today – ‘I am the Good Shepherd’ and ‘I am the Gate’? And perhaps more to the point, why does Jesus include *both* in the same passage – the shepherd and the gate – is he mixing his metaphors or trying to be in two places at once? As it happens, no – once you get a handle on first century Palestinian farming, what you realise that Jesus is basically talking about the same thing, or rather the same person – the shepherd *is* the gate for the sheep. And here’s how....

In those days sheep lived mostly out on the hills by day, and then at night in the sheepfold, which was not a covered barn, but more like a fortified pen. It would be built with loose stones piled to form a rough, walled enclosure – just high enough to keep the sheep *in* and wild animals *out*. There was no gate as such, but when the sheep were in the pen **the shepherd himself (or a colleague) would literally be the gate**. They would sit in the gap and protect the sheep directly. No dogs or locked metal gates – just one brave shepherd. This is why Jesus calls himself both the Gate and the Good Shepherd: in first century Israel, that was two ways of saying the same thing.

It also explains why we need a shepherd rather than a hired hand: it's a dangerous job, if a wild animal came sniffing around you had your courage and a rod to beat them off and that was it. Unless the sheep were your overriding priority, there would be a strong temptation to run away, just as Jesus warned his listeners.

But Jesus is different – he is not just a hired hand, he is the shepherd – indeed he is the good shepherd, the best one you could possibly have. **He looks after us**. There were many threats to the flock, but the shepherd protects them directly. He doesn't run away when he sees a wolf coming, but stands his ground, for the sake of his flock – as Jesus says in v11: 'The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.' We know what that meant for Jesus, even if his hearers didn't then – and it only increases the power of that image.

He also guides us: (v4) 'When the shepherd has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.' Just as the sheep journey over the land to find pasture, so Jesus the Good Shepherd guides us on our journey of life. Not in a general sort of way, but directly. I fear that too many people mistakenly think of God like a shepherd who lets his sheep into the field in the morning and leaves them alone till dusk. But that's not the kind of shepherd Jesus knew, or was talking about. Instead, this shepherd, the Good Shepherd, is involved with us throughout our lives. He leads us – and our job is to follow him.

And our response is to follow: 'my sheep know my voice,' say Jesus, and our calling is to **discern his voice and try to follow**. In ancient Israel, the shepherd (and sheep) often had to work hard to find the really good pasture-land, or sources of water. That's much more like the spiritual life, as we know it, isn't it? Nothing that's really worthwhile ever really comes easily, does it? We need our Good Shepherd to lead us to pasture, and to trust him if that pasture takes a while to find.

This is why we need to trust the Good Shepherd. There are many other voices: not just hired hands, but thieves who want to destroy – to rob us of all that makes life worth living. Voices which lie and deceive. Our first calling is to listen to Jesus' voice – the Good Shepherd who guides and leads us to still waters and green pastures, the Gate who protects and defends us, even to the cost of his life. In a moment we'll celebrate what it meant for the Good Shepherd to lay down his life for his sheep – but as I close, can I invite you to place your life into the strong and loving arms of this Good Shepherd, and to determine to listen to his voice. He longs for you to experience life, and life to the full. Will you receive that life from the Good Shepherd today? Amen.