

Year A, Easter 4. 26th April 2026

Acts 2: 42-47. 1 Peter 2:19-25. John 10: 1-10

Today we are midway through Easter, three Sundays behind us and three ahead of us. Today, the 4th Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday.

Which is rather weird, because today's Gospel reading from John 10 stops at verse 10, when it is in the very next verse that Jesus declares I am the Good Shepherd. That's for next year!!

Mind you there's enough in those 10 verses to make your head spin. For starters, John packs it with metaphor after metaphor. He gives us sheep, a sheepfold, a shepherd, a gate, a gatekeeper, a pasture, thieves and robbers, and strangers.

At one point John says Jesus used this figure of speech but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. Well, there's a surprise! Generally the Pharisees did not understand Jesus, and when they did they often didn't like what they heard because it was generally critical.

Let's consider the context underlying Jesus' words. This passage comes straight after Jesus' healing at the Pool of Siloam of the man born blind, a passage we looked at six weeks ago. Well, I'm sure you can guess the problem. Jesus healed him on the Sabbath at which some of the Pharisees took great offence to the point of saying Jesus couldn't possibly be from God if he didn't observe the Sabbath.

The man himself compounded the problem by wondering whether, as they were so keen for him to repeat how he had been healed, they wanted to become his disciples, which of course enraged them even more. They could not believe that a man born blind, and therefore, in their eyes, born in sin, could understand more about God than they did.

So they expelled him from their community, whereupon Jesus promptly invited him into his community ending his isolation, as well as his physical blindness and spiritual blindness.

When I was doing my curacy in Linlithgow and Bathgate I led a study on the Good Shepherd through 1,000 years of Scripture. What was clear was that the Jewish religious leaders, and that included the Pharisees, were called to be good shepherds to the people of Israel. Yet in Jeremiah 23, Ezekiel 34 and Zechariah 10, God makes clear his displeasure and anger at their failure to look after their flock as they should, he accuses the shepherds of looking after themselves at the expense of their sheep.

You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them, God says in Ezekiel and goes on I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David.

Set in that context Jesus' words start to make sense and any Pharisee who knew his Scriptures would have understood that they were the thieves, robbers and strangers that Jesus was talking about. As an aside it's worth noting how Jesus contrasts his desire for us to enjoy abundant life with the thief who comes to steal, kill and destroy, given the only other use of the word thief in John's Gospel relates to Judas, who according to John took money earmarked for the poor.

Nevertheless, Jesus' words are not necessarily easy for us to make sense of. For example, who is the gatekeeper? Is it God, is it the Holy Spirit? I suppose the one consolation is that we know the gatekeeper can't be Jesus, because he's the gate, But hang on, Jesus is also the

shepherd, and the good shepherd at that. So how can he be the gate and the shepherd at the same time?

And where are we in this story? As Christians we can all too often complacently assume that we must be the good guys, the ones safely ensconced in the sheepfold thanks to God's grace.

But can we in all honesty say that we never heed the seductive voice of the stranger, that we never take shortcuts when the right thing to do is to enter through the gate, that we always follow the shepherd especially when he or she calls us to follow him into dangerous-looking uncharted territory, that we never play the role of bandit in someone else's life? I doubt any of us could claim anything like perfection if anyone was to tot up our score.

But I don't think Jesus is trying either to make us feel bad about ourselves or to lull us into a sense of false superiority. Rather, I think he was trying to tell the Pharisees and by extension us something about himself.

Yes, as the Good Shepherd, Jesus clearly offers us direction, nurture and protection, and he offers those things in many of his other 'I am' sayings. But here in this passage, Jesus very clearly refers to himself as the gate.

When you see a gate, what do you think of? Is it there to keep you out, is it a barrier, is it a wall, a dividing line? Is it meant to separate us or isolate us or even imprison us, like the Berlin Wall, or Trump's wall along the southern border of the United States or the West Bank Wall outside Jerusalem?

Or at a gentler level, when you had young children or can still remember your childhood, how did you see the gates at the top or bottom of the stairs?

Or do you see it more as a door, an opening, even the place where freedom begins? That, I think, is what Jesus was getting at when he described himself as the gate. He was offering release and liberty. His gate was one that opened out rather than one that shut in. Whatever this passage is about I don't think Jesus was trying to define who is in or who's out when it comes to the kingdom.

That's something we can do all too readily, but gatekeeping is not our job. It never has been and should never be.

So what is it about? I think the last verse gives us as good an answer as we'll find. I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly. It's about life, life that pushes across boundaries, life that doesn't deny the threat of thieves and bandits and worse, yet at the same time offers nourishment, pasture and rest.

I don't know about you, but I marvel at the way life, however small and tenuous, can be found in the strangest of nooks and crannies offering itself for our benefit if we're only willing to look.

So perhaps we need to ask ourselves some questions that might feel quite personal. Do I resist the open gate – and if so why? Where am I closed to change and averse to risk? Whose voice do I follow most readily? Am I too scared, too suspicious, too tired to pursue the abundant life Jesus wants me to have? Which siren voices are distracting me?

One such potential voice might be those who preach the prosperity gospel, the idea that wealth will follow from finding favour with God and the implications that those who find life hard do so because they haven't found favour with God.

Now you may have noticed that I don't use my sermons to talk politics but I am going to make an exception today because I was, and still am, so enraged by something I learned this week. Paula White,

Donald Trump's main spiritual advisor, said a few years ago that saying no to Donald Trump was equivalent to saying no to God. Yet hers is a voice that many listen to .

So how can we make sure we recognise the voice of the good shepherd over all those voices that claim to offer abundance? For the blind man the restoration of his sight amounted to abundance, because abundance, in the sense that Jesus means it, can often just mean having what we need, not necessarily all that we want.

As the gate, Jesus offers pasture or provision on one side and protection on the other. As the Good Shepherd he offers his presence. Provision, protection and presence are all that we need for an abundant life. They will enable us to flourish. That flourishing, that abundance will look very different for, say, a single parent and a pensioner. It will look different in different places

The blind man's healing was not just about saving him from marginalisation and isolation. It also had the consequence of offering him abundant life. What my and your salvation involves will almost certainly look very different. But if we think salvation is just about being saved from our sins and our failings, we are in real danger of missing the point.

The heart of all the Gospels, and especially John's, is the resurrection promise of life and new possibilities. We are not just saved from something, we are saved FOR something – and that something is abundant life. But it's not just something to hoard for ourselves, our calling is to help those around us experience it in their own lives too.