

Sermon: Fourth Sunday in Easter: 7 May 2017

*So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep" (John 10.7).*

Oh. Well, that's a bit different. Where are all the hymns about Jesus the gate? Because all our hymns – even our prayers – keep going on about the Lord being our shepherd. And it's a lovely metaphor, even one that Christ himself uses later on in this chapter, but that's not what he's saying here. Here, he is the gate – the way through which the sheep have: freedom to come and go, access to food and shelter from danger. As we heard, this is the gate through which "they may have life and have it abundantly." But then who's the shepherd?

It may help to remind ourselves of the context into which Christ speaks these words. First of all, we have stopped dwelling on the stories of Easter Day. After three weeks of looking at Christ's resurrection from different perspectives, the church now peeks back into Christ's pre-passion life. Now that we have immersed ourselves in the Easter story, we go back to look at Christ's life and teaching through that lens: his death and resurrection. So the Christ who calls himself the gate for the sheep is the flesh-and-blood Jesus, going around Jerusalem, making enemies for himself as well as disciples – the same one who is determined to give up his life on the cross out of love for enemies as well as disciples.

In John's Gospel, this passage fits right between two passages that we read in Lent: the story of the man born blind, whose sight Christ restores, and the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. The first of these stories gives the context of whom Christ is addressing with this allegory of sheep and shepherds, gates, thieves and bandits.

So the man born blind: Christ restored his sight, which was miraculous and wonderful. But the focus of the story was more on the Pharisees and other Judeans who were offended by the miracle, who refused to believe that it had happened. They were indignant that the healing they didn't believe in had been done on the Sabbath, and they drove the healed man out of the synagogue for refusing to denounce his healer.

Of course, Christ reaches out to him and draws him into a new and living community through him. He also rebukes the Pharisees for presuming to guard the door to God's community. He goes so far as to suggest that they are the ones who, in their self-righteousness, have become blind. This is how that passage ends: the Pharisees say to Christ, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Christ replies, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say 'We see,' your sin remains. Very truly I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep" (9.41-10.2).

So, those who claim to see and to be judges and guardians of righteousness on God's behalf are not entering the sheepfold by the gate. They are not entering through Christ, the gate, but climbing in by another way. In claiming to see, the Pharisees presume to make themselves both the gate and the shepherd for the sheep, but here Christ tells them that they are in fact thieves and bandits.

But who is the shepherd? "The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep." The one who enters by the crucified and risen Christ is the shepherd. Whoever goes to God's people (to all people) in self-sacrificing love, in humility, without judgement, is a shepherd. Insofar as we are called to love and care for one another and for the world, we, the baptized, are the shepherd. We who enter the sheepfold of God's world are shepherds – if we enter through Christ.

Yes, it's true that Christ will go on to describe himself as the good shepherd, and he is indeed the true and model shepherd for us all, but that doesn't take away our own responsibility as his disciples, called to be shepherds after him. In this parish, we will continue to pray after every communion this Easter season that "we, who share his body, [may] *live his risen life*; we, who drink his cup, bring life to others; we, whom the Spirit lights, give light to the world" (BAS 214-5). So we are called and nourished through the Eucharist to be shepherds. But we must enter through Christ, the gate.

If we attempt to enter another way, we are not to be trusted. If we try to offer alternative ways to find shelter and pasture – security through wealth or achievement, fulfillment through hard work or conformity to social expectations, security in following certain rules, fulfillment through belonging to the right groups

and having the right views – if this is how we try to “help” or “lead” people, we are only thieves.

To be a shepherd to God’s sheep, we need to get our self-satisfied assumptions out of the way, to give ourselves up out of love, to live the risen life of the crucified one. When we, the shepherd, come to the flock through Christ, and lead them out through Christ, the sheep will have all they need.

How would our behaviour and speech be affected if we imagined ourselves coming to every encounter with another by way of a gate called Christ – the gate of self-giving love? What if we paused each time in order mentally to swing that gate open on the way? What if we never tried to lead anyone – to give advice, to suggest a course of action, to give an opinion – without first mentally swinging open that same gate called Christ – self-giving love? Surely we would encounter others with our hearts full of love – and empty of our own selfish motives. Surely we would leave all judgement and pride at the gate, and thus leave the way to Christ open.

If we are shepherds who come and go through Christ, the gate, we will speak to all people with the voice of the self-giving, selflessly loving Christ. And they will know his voice. And they will find safety and pasture and abundant life through him.

Amen