

John 10: 1-10 Jesus the Good Shepherd

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Lord Jesus, may we hear your voice in our hearts and minds today.
Amen.

As many of you know, I have had the joy of looking after a small flock of sheep for 30 odd years, and so I delight in this Chapter 10 of John's Gospel. Today's reading is just the first section, but it's well worth reading the whole chapter, and I hope you will find the time to do so this week.

Palestinian shepherds didn't have sheep dogs to round up and drive the sheep for them, as is usual with our shepherds. They kept sheep primarily for their wool, and so would keep them a good number of years. The shepherd would know his sheep individually, and the sheep would get to know the shepherd; they would learn to trust him. He would lead them, call them, and they would follow. He would take care of them, and make sure they were provided with grazing and water. He would protect them from wild animals and sheep stealers.

At night in winter, the sheep would be herded together into a sheepfold, shared with other flocks of sheep. In the morning, each shepherd would come, the gatekeeper would open the gate, the shepherd would call his sheep by name, they would recognise his voice, and out they would come. Some would have to be given some encouragement – literally be 'shoved out'. In the summer, each shepherd would fold his own flock in an enclosure, and he would sit himself down in the entrance, to keep the sheep inside, in a safe place where they could rest and relax, and to keep predators and thieves out. This is what Jesus is talking about when he says 'I am the door', or 'I am the gate'.

Now if someone were to say to you, 'I am the door', you would think there was something wrong with them. So what does Jesus mean here? Why does he use this analogy? Well, one way of looking at this is to think of a door as having two sides. Like the front door of

your house: one side is the outside world, the other side is your home. So it is with Jesus: he stands on the threshold between heaven and earth, as it were. One side is a man on earth, the other side is God in heaven, and through that door of I AM the love of the human race goes up to God, and the love of God comes down on the human race.*

Jesus is the door, the way through for us, the way to find God, the way to experience God's love and care for us. He calls us into his fold, into the quiet, into the safe place of rest and recuperation, where he will restore our soul. And then in the morning, he calls us out, to go out into the world and to do his work, in what may be challenging and difficult places. That is to be the pattern of our lives, as it was the pattern of his life: he went out and about, teaching, challenging, healing, comforting – giving of himself wholeheartedly day after day. And then he withdrew to pray, to be refreshed and restored and strengthened by God his Father for what the next day might bring.

I am the door, says Jesus. Through me you can come and go between two worlds. The Lord watches over your going out and your coming in, as the Psalmist said (Ps.121). When we are weary from our work, from the demands made on us, we can retreat into his presence, into the sheepfold, and rest in his Spirit. Then, we go out again in his name, to do his will. If we get too comfortable inside the sheepfold, he might have to give us a nudge, a bit of a shove and push us back out! In and out, through the door of Jesus. If we were to stay outside all the time, we would probably burn out, or get lost, or fall prey to some kind of attack, like a sheep out in the wilderness all night. But if we stay inside all the time, how is the work of the kingdom to be done?

You might think that Nuns and Monks in enclosed orders, in their convents and monasteries, have decided to stay inside the sheepfold all the time. What about them? Well, I would just say that that is almost certainly not their decision, but is a special calling.

When you think about it, it's like being in permanent lockdown! Confined in their building, not seeing family or friends, freedoms curtailed. I'm thinking here of those in enclosed orders, of course, not those like Mother Theresa in Calcutta. Some people seem to think it's a cop-out, an easy life. I hope that after our experience of self-isolation and lockdown we might see things differently. Theirs is in fact a challenging life, of self-sacrifice, a life given over to constant prayer on behalf of others, on behalf of the whole world. A lifetime of listening to God.

Which brings me to the second main point in these verses: Jesus says that his sheep know his voice. Recognising their shepherd's voice was absolutely vital for the sheep: if they didn't listen, if they wandered off and tried to join someone else's flock, they would be cast out and wouldn't last long.

We know, as Christians, that we too have to learn to hear and to recognise the voice of Jesus. We have to learn what it is he wants us to do, where he wants us to serve him. How do we do that?

Thinking about this, I realised that when John was writing his Gospel, and when Jesus was teaching, most people could not read. They could only learn by listening. Life is very different for us today. Most people can read, and while we may get a lot of information through the television, we also get a great deal of our information through the written word: be it the newspaper, or our computers, or phones or books. All these media 'speak' to us. In fact, we are bombarded these days with so many different voices. How, when there are all these different voices talking at us, how do we recognise and hear the voice of Jesus? How do we know what is true? How do we know which voice to follow?

We live in an era of fake news, of disinformation. We can't be sure that newspaper editors, for instance, are as interested in telling the truth as in making money. We know that powerful interests lobby us, and will tell us whatever they think they need to to persuade us to

support them. It's so easy to hear half a tale, one side of an argument. So what are we to do?

Well, in order to recognise the voice of Jesus we have to become familiar with what he says: to do that, we need to read and reread the Gospels, where we see and hear the real Jesus. There we find out what guided and motivated him, what he called people to do. His words were true then and they still can be trusted today. We need to listen, to let those words really speak to us. Then we have a benchmark, a yardstick by which we can measure everything else that we hear. We can ask ourselves: 'Does this fit with what Jesus taught?' 'Could I imagine Jesus saying this?'. If the honest answer is 'No', then we need to think again.

And the other key way to become familiar with the voice of Jesus is to follow him daily into that sheepfold, to spend time with him, listening to him speak to us in prayer. One of the problems of isolation is that we can be left alone with our own thoughts an awful lot of the time, with no-one else to question or challenge us. So it is particularly important that we keep coming back to Jesus and let his Spirit be our guide, so that we don't fall prey to the robbers and thieves Jesus spoke about, who would lead us astray.

There are, in our world, some very persuasive speakers and leaders, and they are certainly not all speaking to us the words that Jesus would say. Can you tell which is which? Perhaps, in these weeks of lockdown, we might all commit to learning afresh to listen to the voice of Jesus, so that when we can get out again, we shall recognise his voice above the clamour of all the other voices out there, and we shall follow him and him alone. Amen.

*(*Water into Wine*, Stephen Verney, p.104)