

Homily: Easter 4. Good Shepherd Sunday 2020

“The Church’s door stands open,” the first line of a hymn, the children sang, to which the teacher under her breath would say, no it isn’t, it’s firmly shut. The church school in that inner London parish was opposite the side of the church, which was where the very big main door was. It was on the side, as houses were built right up to where a normal main west door would be. We all are living with that experience now; our church doors are necessarily firmly locked! Just like the first Easter night, the doors were locked for fear; today it is fear of spreading infection and everyone’s safety. No one at the moment comes through the main doors.

The opening words we have in today’s gospel uses the word gate, as the entry to the sheep fold. Other translations, and the Greek word used by St John is door. Emeritus Pope Benedict, in his main book on ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ uses the word door, and reminded us in introducing the Year of Faith, 2012 that “**the door of faith is always open for us.** (Acts 14: 27)

Though physically we cannot gather together **as and in church**, nevertheless The Lord is always with us, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Jesus himself says, ‘I am the gate (door) of the sheepfold.’

Today’s passage from John chapter 10, obviously follows immediately from the whole of chapter 9 which we read on the fourth Sunday of Lent, the man born blind. That chapter ends on the refusal of the Pharisees to believe in Jesus after the cure of the man born blind. What John’s hearers and readers would have in mind as soon as they heard Jesus say the opening words today, and the other ‘I am’ statement in v.11 I am the Good Shepherd, is this passage from Ezekiel (34: 11-12, 23)

“The Lord says this: I am going to look after my flock myself and keep all of it in view; as a shepherd keeps all his flock in view so I shall keep my sheep in view. I mean to raise up a shepherd, my servant David and put him in charge of them and he will pasture them.”

Homilies today are nothing like as long as years ago. St Augustine in a Sermon on Shepherds, we have sections of for 13 days at the Office of Readings in weeks 24 & 25 in Ordinary time.

Ezekiel, speaking God's word, excoriates the authorities in his own time. They have become irresponsible and thieving shepherds, feeding themselves rather than their flock. God would take away their maladministration and become their shepherd himself. Finally he would appoint another shepherd after the figure of David, who before he was their great king, was a good shepherd-boy to his father Jesse of Bethlehem...

John sees all this coming true in Jesus. God has become the shepherd in Jesus, himself the Messiah and Son of David, Jesus' fidelity to his sheep, his sacrifice for them, stands out in contrast to the failure of the stumbling, blinded, bullying authorities that appear in chapter 9. It is a sad reflection that the abuse crisis in the church, that we are still reeling from, has been perpetrated by a few bishops and priests, shepherds of the flock. We pray for healing of all abuse.

Metaphors come fast and often in these verses. There are the sheep- easily identified as the flock that Jesus intends to lead into good pasture (v.9) us! those whom he knows by name, and who recognise his voice, (v3-4, 14) us! Those whom he intends to defend against thieves and robbers, (1, 8,10) us!

Jesus will effect all this because he is the **GOOD SHEPHERD**, loved by the Father because he will lay down his life for the sheep.

The sheepfold, probably a stone wall enclosure with a single entryway. Used to protect flocks at night from thieves and predators. Only the shepherd would be recognised and admitted by the designated gatekeeper.

Calls by name, a mark of intimacy (I have called you by your name, you are mine): to lead out: to graze and find pasture. Shepherding in hot countries is not like here where we can turn the sheep out into the fields or open moors; In hot countries the grass is rare so the shepherd has to lead them from pasture to pasture. A full time job, requiring total dedication, It was also dangerous, as thieves and wild animals were around. That has not changed. Only this week a headline read 'Sheep rustling surges after meat rationed, thieves steal hundreds of sheep.'

In our Lord's time shepherds were pretty low on the social scale, even if they were the first to 'hear the angels sing!' and visit the Christ-Child. I am the Good Shepherd, the gate/door, are important affirmations. The shepherd was required **to lead** the sheep, us. To lead out recalls how Joshua was appointed to lead the people out of the wilderness (Num. 27; 17) and how God promised to recover the lost sheep of Israel by leading them out of their exile among the nations. Ezk34.

In the Gospel today v.6 they did not understand, the Pharisees who are blind to the spiritual dimension of Jesus teaching. All who came before refers to the shepherds of Israel, many of whom were denounced by the prophets as worthless and evil. (Jer: 23:1-3, Ezek; 34 1-10. Zech. 11:17) The Pharisees are their spiritual descendants. **The proof of a true shepherd is that he enters through Jesus as the door.**

The Psalm today is the most familiar one, but always to let run through our hearts and minds '**The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want.**' The Psalm celebrates the guidance, nourishment, protection, comfort, celebration and eternal destiny which God gives to his People. With all that in mind, do take to heart also the very last words of today's gospel. **I have come so that you may have life and have it to the full.**

At the moment times are very strange and the lockdown for many, if not all, is when the going becomes more than usually rough and tough, and then it is a question of hanging on until the storms blow over, and when all will be well and all manner of things will be well. (St Julian of Norwich) It is vital at such times to hear the Lord, who is our Good Shepherd, who never leaves us, saying, 'I am with you always, yes till the end of time;' or 'I have come so that you may have life and have it to the full.'

Many people are reflecting that life will be very different after this, and in many ways we hope it will change us radically, change us to focus even more on Jesus, who is the gate/door, the Good shepherd the only true and proper guide through life, in its fullness here, and eternal life in heaven.