

Sermon for 26th April 2026, Year A, Easter 4

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

John 10:1-10

Sermon

This Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is traditionally known as Good Shepherd Sunday because of this Gospel reading in which Jesus tries to explain to the listening Pharisees the protective and caring relationship he has with his sheep, the people of his flock.

Ironically and inexplicably, the reading actually stops one verse before Jesus says the famous words, "I am the good shepherd," so we're left with a much more confusing mix of images in which Jesus first contrasts the gatekeeper who guards the gate to the sheepfold with the bandits and thieves who try to sneak over the walls to steal the sheep, and then he describes himself, not as the shepherd, but as the gate itself – the only legitimate way to find protection and safe access to good pasture.

It's no wonder that the Gospel records that 'they did not understand what he was saying to them.' It's quite possible that we don't understand either, so let's try to put these mixed metaphors into some kind of context.

In traditional agrarian societies, a sheep pen would likely be constructed from stone walls adjacent to a dwelling, perhaps with branches of thorns on top of them acting like a barbed wire fence to dissuade anyone from climbing over. There would be one gateway into the sheepfold which could be locked to prevent anyone getting in to steal the sheep, which were of course valuable both as sources of food and wool, and wealth for trade. Sometimes, in a sufficiently large enclosure, several flocks would be kept together, with a hired gatekeeper allowing only the known shepherds to enter in order to bring out their flocks

to pasture. Ancient experience in traditional societies apparently confirms that shepherds often know each of their sheep by name, and they recognise his particular voice. Also, as we see in the reading, in these societies, the shepherd leads the sheep and they follow him, which is in contrast to modern shepherding where the shepherd and his dogs follow behind the flock - often these days riding on a quad bike! - to keep them on the right path.

This image of the shepherd as a symbol of a gentle and protective leadership is frequently used in the Bible to demonstrate the relationship both between God and his people, and between God's anointed leaders and their people. God is described as a shepherd of Israel in several Old Testament passages, most famously in today's Psalm, Psalm 23 – "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." King David is also celebrated as an ideal shepherd king, and in Ezekiel chapter 34, the people of Israel are described as sheep to be led and protected, and there is heavy criticism for false shepherds who harm and exploit the sheep for their own benefit. "Woe, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves!" says Ezekiel. "Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat; you clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatted calves, but you do not feed the 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 strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them."

It isn't difficult to see that Jesus is using coded language to heavily criticise the Pharisees and other religious leaders for being more like bandits and thieves rather than the shepherds they were supposed to be. And then, Jesus describes himself as the gate through which all wise and caring shepherds must pass to reach their flock, something the Pharisees and other religious leaders are clearly not willing to do.

For a bit more context, we can go back one chapter to chapter nine, which contains the story of a man who had been born blind, whom Jesus heals on the Sabbath. The Pharisees of course are outraged and rather than celebrate God's miracle, they interrogate the man to find out who healed him, and when he declares that Jesus must have come from God to be able to do such miraculous healings, they insult the man and his parentage and drive him out. Some of the Pharisees then find Jesus who points out that while God is enabling the blind to see, it is the Pharisees who have become blind. And then Jesus begins this metaphor of sheep and shepherds and bandits and thieves.

If you're still a bit confused by what Jesus is trying to say to the Pharisees, I can hardly blame you. I sometimes wonder if Jesus really thought this one through, what with all the mixed metaphors. Is Jesus the gate, the gatekeeper, or the shepherd, or all three?

More questions arise from verses 7 to 10. Jesus declares himself to be the gate for the sheep, such that anyone who enters by him will be saved and find pasture. But what does it mean to be saved, and who is the gatekeeper who gets to decide who can use the gate? Throughout history, the Church has often become a gatekeeper, sometimes protecting its community from false teachers, but also often excluding some sheep for being, in their eyes, insufficiently morally pure. The one gate and the one flock and the one shepherd have become hundreds of flocks and hundreds of church denominations, all accusing each other of being bandits and thieves and false shepherds, and all justified by a metaphor that Jesus surely never intended to be misused in this way.

Fortunately, in verse 10, Jesus finally offers an explanation of his own role that clarifies things a little: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." This concept of 'life' is fundamental to John's Gospel. It's first mentioned in verse 4 of chapter 1: "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people," and then again at the Last Supper, Jesus declares that he has been given authority to give

eternal life to all those who follow him. So 'life' can be understood not only as the vital spirit that animates every human being, but also a purposeful vocation that serves the common good, participation in the community of loving kindness and compassion that Jesus is modelling and nurturing, delight in one another, unity with the transforming Holy Spirit within our hearts, and a sense of security in Christ, come what may.

The role of community is central in John's Gospel, and we're given several images that portray Jesus's role in creating and protecting this. He is the vine and we are the branches; he is the net in which all kinds of fish can be gathered together; he is the life-giver who restores Lazarus back to his family; he is the gate and the shepherd of the sheep. All these images speak of Jesus's capacity and desire to form true community out of different and varied groups of people, so long as they will let go of their pride and status and power over others.

Sadly, over the centuries, the Church replaced this humble image of Jesus as Good Shepherd with the far more majestic image of Jesus as Pantocrator or Lord of All, as Roman emperors united Church and State. As the Church became an expression of imperial power, the shepherd's staff was replaced by a gilded crozier, and the crown of thorns by jewelled crowns and tiaras. Certainly the metaphors Jesus uses in this passage are complicated to understand, but what is always clear is that at the heart of Jesus's message and his community are simplicity, sacrifice, solidarity, inclusion, forgiveness and love, and that this is what it means to have life, and have it abundantly.