

I am the Gate of the Sheepfold **Fourth Sunday of Easter**

John 10:1-10

Memorials

There is a story in the Old Testament where the great hero of the Hebrew people Moses, comes across a burning bush. Moses hears the voice of God speaking to him from the bush. The voice tells him to go back to his people and tell them that they are going to be rescued from slavery in Egypt.

This was time when it was believed that there were many gods and so Moses asks the voice,

What is your name? Who shall I tell my people has sent me?

The voice answers, rather enigmatically and possibly not very helpfully

I am who I am. Thus you shall say to the Israelites,
"I am has sent me to you."

Exodus 3:14

I think the point is this. Human beings want to try to pin God down, to define him: we say he is like a judge; or a father; or a friend; or a warrior. What the voice is saying to Moses is,

'Don't try to pin me down; don't try to stereotype me. Just get to know me at first hand. Come to know me with your heart; do not worry about knowing about me with your head. All I will tell you about myself is this: I am.'

According to John's Gospel there are at least nine occasions when Jesus presents a little picture of himself. Every picture, every description begins with the words 'I am'. To us these words seem insignificant. But to the Jewish people two thousand years ago they would have been like setting light to tinder. It was as if Jesus was claiming to be God. In truth he was claiming to be God. It is small wonder they crucified him!

If we move on to some of the images that follow, we find that some of them are very famous and very concrete: 'I am the light of the world'; 'I am the Good Shepherd'; some are more abstract: 'I am the way and the truth and the life'; 'I am the resurrection'. And others seem just a little odd, like today's picture: 'I am the gate for the sheep.'

But it makes a little more sense if we know something about sheepfolds in Jesus' time. If you go just a few miles north of here you will still find sheepfolds. Small fields enclosed by dry stone wall where sheep can be gathered together. Somewhere in the dry stone walls will be a gap and the gaps will be fitted with a gate – perhaps a five bar gate of wood or, more likely these days, a light weight steel one.

Probably the sheepfolds of Jesus' day were not very different except for one thing: there were no gates. There was a gateway but no gate. The sheepfold was sealed by the shepherd who lay down in it. He was the gate. And one purpose of this was to prevent the sheep getting out. But the other purpose was to prevent the wolves getting in. There are no wolves left in Britain now but we still talk about a wolf in sheep' clothing – and we know exactly what we mean.

But Jesus also speaks about thieves and bandits. Naturally thieves and bandits climb into the sheepfold over the wall – they do not enter by the proper gateway. And we know from everything else that Jesus says that by thieves and bandits he means the religious leaders of his day. So he is drawing a contrast between himself and the religious leaders of his day. And the message is clear: don't trust them, trust me.

So why should we trust Jesus?

First because he is God. There is a sense in which Jesus is controlling the course of the world. He is controlling the course of your life. This may not always be evident: there are undoubtedly times when life seems confused, meaningless, out of control, but at the heart of the Christian faith is the conviction that God in Christ is present in every event.

Second because he died for us. As God, Christ could have stood aloof from all the suffering in the world. He could have offered empathy from afar. But he chose another path: he chose to become human, he chose to

be rejected, scorned, whipped and executed as a rebel. That was a sign of his love. So when we believe that Jesus is present in every event, it is not as the one who seems to be in charge. Very often it is as the one who suffers - he walks with us. And that gives him a real authority.

So often we think that authority comes with holding a gun; or a truncheon; or a rule book. Jesus' authority is not like that. His authority comes from carrying a cross. His great complaint against the religious leaders of his time was that they were hypocrites. They made rules for the people to follow but did not keep those rules themselves. As a result they had no authority. In my book being willing to die for me is the greatest possible authority

So what should we trust him to do?

Whatever we need. And what we need is not necessarily what we desire. But specifically today we trust Christ to care for those who have died. If we pursue the image of a sheepfold perhaps we might see them all as sheep, gathered into the sheepfold until the day of the resurrection, protected by Christ, against wolves, thieves and bandits.

But we trust him too to care for us who are left. Some bereavements are more shocking than others, as when someone dies young or suddenly. But the truth is all bereavements are shocking - and that is true not only in the case the obvious bereavement of death, but for the many other losses we all suffer: redundancy; retirement; divorce; marriage; illness; old age. And in that state of loss we may pass through a bewildering range of emotions:

- we pretend it has not happened and carry on with life as normal
- we get angry - with ourselves, with God, with those we love most - even with the person who has died.
- we bargain - we offer deals to God, we tell him all the things we will do if only the loved one will come back - and some of them we may carry out.
- we become depressed, hopelessly despairing, as if there is no future.

And all those feeling get mixed up, go away then come back later.

So where is God in all this? I believe he is waiting at the end, for the time when we come out of the tunnel. But, and perhaps more important, he is with us in the tunnel.

St Paul writes to the church in Rome of a whole universe struggling with the fact that things are not as they should be:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves,

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8 vss 18,22,23,29

It is a striking image, the whole creation groaning in labour pains. But it helps us to understand that the confusion of the present time has a purpose and that God is working to bring that purpose about.

But let us go back to the image with which we began, that of the sheep and the shepherd.

Jesus gives us a beautiful picture of the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep.

The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

John 10:3-4

That shepherd is Jesus; and the sheep are those who have died: Peter, Doreen, Jean, Keith, Mary and Aron. But the sheep are also us. We may be

separated by death but to Jesus we are all one flock. We and those who have died are united in that we all know and follow the voice of Jesus. We are one shepherd; we are one flock.

N Clews

7th May 2017

St Margaret's only