

# Fourth Sunday of Easter

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## Introduction

The Good Shepherd discourse in John 10 is challenging. So much so that those who were listening to Jesus speak failed to understand it, so we should be wary of simplistic interpretations. Jesus appears to be concerned with how a person gets access to the sheep. Genuine shepherds come by the gate, in full view of the gatekeeper, they call for the sheep who respond to the voice. But those who intend harm for the sheep tend to access the sheepfold using more nefarious means. This may in fact be a parable about the character and qualities of those who wish to lead.

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## Text

**John 10:1-10**

### **Jesus the Good Shepherd**

‘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. 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. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’

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## Comment

The world seems filled these days with those who use positions of authority for self-aggrandisement and whose leadership is maintained through violence and exploitation. God preserve and protect us from those types of leaders and raise up among us those who will come to those positions through personal sacrifice. Jesus clashes repeatedly with those who are in positions of power and authority and here in the Good shepherd discourse he delivers a veiled critique of their leadership.

The local sheepfold was a cooperative endeavour in Jesus day. It was built just outside the town, with a low stone wall with a gap in it functioning as a gate. All shepherds in the town would shelter their sheep there at night and someone, perhaps one of the shepherds, perhaps a young person, would be hired to act as gatekeeper who would keep the sheep safe and raise the alarm if there was a threat. All the sheep could be kept together because they would recognise the voice of their own shepherd.

It seems that Jesus is concerned in this passage with how the means of access used to get to the sheep can reveal something about the character of the one seeking access and the nature of their ultimate intentions.

It's worth noting that whilst in the first part of the passage the sheep are safely tucked up in the sheepfold. In the second part of the reading, the sheep come out. In John 5:28–29 there is another discussion about the authoritative voice which has the capacity to empower the dead to “come out” of their graves. And in John 11:43 the instruction to the dead Lazarus in his tomb is to “come out!”

It is also possible that this passage is rooted in the tradition associated with Num 27:15–21 which is concerned about the appointment of a good and authoritative leader for Israel.

This passage therefore may be about leadership and authority and not necessarily about how to get to heaven. The means of access determines the nature of the leader. Those who come by their roles in malign ways bring only exploitation and death. Those who come by means of the gate of sacrifice bring life and health and abundance to those for whom they assume responsibility.

The one who comes to the sheepfold via the gate and the gatekeeper is a genuine shepherd. Her sheep are safely tucked away inside the fold, and she only needs to make the familiar sound they recognise to ensure that the sheep will hear it, recognise the one who calls and come out. Therefore, the one who enters by means of the gate is the shepherd.

On the other hand there are those who know that they are unfamiliar to every sheep inside that fold. They could come before the gate and call out till they are hoarse but the sheep will recoil. And it will be obvious to the gatekeeper that they shouldn't be there. If they want access to the sheep they are going to have to find some other way in. These charlatans are thieves and robbers, intent on destruction, on stealing, killing and destroying and are not interested in the welfare of the sheep.

Jesus uses very aggressive and strong words to describe them. They are, in biblical Greek, *kleptes*, a word from which we get the English word kleptomaniac. In John's Gospel Jesus uses this word to criticise the economic practices of those who control the Temple. The word bandit is *lestes*. Wes Howard-Brook translates it as “revolutionary guerrillas.” Is it too strong to suggest that in our terms we might speak of terrorists? Whatever we might make of this translation what is clear is that Jesus is referring to violence of an economic and a physical variety.

It is the gate which reveals the true nature of those who seek to get to the sheep, and passage through the gate proves the qualification to lead them.

So when Jesus says he is the gate what exactly does he mean? This is where the parable gets complicated for me, so I can understand something of the confusion of those who were listening to him.

If Jesus is concerned with the character of those who want access to the sheep could it be that in the second part of this discourse those who enter by the gate are not the sheep, but the shepherds? Could it be that they will be saved from violent action from the gatekeeper and perhaps even the other shepherds because they are part of the collective and not a thief or a bandit—we know that because they entered by the gate.

And because they access the sheep this way they can come and go with ease to find pasture. This is the abundant life.

But we still need to identify what exactly Jesus might mean when he says he is the gate. Could it possibly be that Jesus is talking about his willingness to lay down his life, which is the phrase which marks the beginning of the next pericope? The gate represents the willingness to sacrifice.

Therefore the test which demonstrates the true character of those who seek access to the people is the eschewing of economic or physical coercion and violence, and the personal willingness to endure the impact of both on their behalf.

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## Response

Who are the leaders in your life? In work? In Church? In sport or social life? How do they exercise their leadership and can you identify why people follow them or resist them? In what contexts do you act in a leadership role? How do you lead? What might Jesus say to you in the light of this portion of John's Gospel? Pray for the leaders in your life and in the life of the nation and the world.

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## Prayer

Lord Jesus,  
Great Shepherd of your sheep,  
We are grateful for your example  
Of guidance and leadership.

Your words and actions  
are gentle and wise.  
You do not coerce or manipulate  
You do not force or threaten.

We pray for all those here on earth  
who bear the heavy burden of leadership  
May they be similarly gentle and wise.

And we pray for those of us who follow  
May we be enthusiastic and humble  
so that we, by our following,  
may draw the best from our leaders.

Amen