

Fourth Sunday of Easter

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Introduction

Although the tenth chapter of John's gospel opens with familiar imagery of a shepherd and sheep, the early disciples struggled to grasp its meaning. It continues to challenge our instinctive response to divide the world into good and bad.

Text

“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.

Comment

Jesus' shepherd is one who reliably comes in through the gate (as good shepherds should), and whose voice the sheep will know and follow. Jesus contrasts the shepherd with the thief, who doesn't come in through the gate, whose voice would seem strange to untrusting sheep, and whose intent is clearly malicious. If someone comes in via a gate, they are acting in a way consistent with the sheep's wellbeing; if they come in by another route: watch out.

It's all very matter-of-fact, and Jesus' example leads us to the conclusion that if we are like these sheep, we will instinctively trust the right voice to follow. Yet in using this analogy, Jesus confounds his disciples. John tells us they didn't understand what he was saying (not particularly reassuring when stressing the need to know the right voice). So again Jesus tries to explain his meaning. And for those of us who are quick to associate Jesus with the figure of the shepherd, there comes a

surprise. Jesus isn't the shepherd in this story yet; he is the gate.

As the gate, Jesus is both the way into the sheepfold to find safety and the way out of the sheepfold to find good pasture. We don't think about gates very much. Maybe we should. When closed, a gate provides protection; when open, it leads out to abundance. With both functions, the sheep are well served.

The conflict here in this passage, therefore, isn't just about whose voices we instinctively respond to or who it is we can trust; it is also about whether we have the right structures in place to keep all of us safe and to keep each of us in reach of what we need to thrive. In this initial analogy Jesus isn't presenting himself as the better choice for people to follow; he is stressing everyone's need for basic security and his desire that all might enjoy the fullness of life.

Response

In these highly polarised times when many of us are on alert for fake news and quick to point fingers at false saviours, it's helpful to note that Jesus isn't asking us to sort out the good shepherds from the villainous bandits. After all, such distinctions should be obvious: the trustworthy, life-giving, gate-using types will make themselves known. As will those who come to steal and kill and destroy. The thieves in this story are strangely inconsequential; the sheep know better and simply ignore them. While naming those who put the flock at risk may be important in another context, it is not the main point of this lesson.

Instead, this passage pushes us to ask questions that shouldn't need to be asked. Does our sheepfold have a gate? Are our structures adequately protecting the folk they should serve? Can everyone expect basic securities and access to basic needs? Check again. Gates are important.

Jesus' clarification that he is the gate in this story challenges our instinct to divide the world into good and bad, us and them. More importantly, it draws our attention to God's primary concern: the wellbeing of those in need.

Prayer

God of the protective fold,
God of the abundant life:
you did not form us
to live in fear of others
or in want of simple joys.
In your keep may we find
the abundance you came to provide:
a constant supply of the love we need
and an ever-opening expanse
of a life that is ours to explore.
Amen.

