

Sermon on Sunday 3 May 2020
by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader
Reading: John 10. 1-10 (Good Shepherd)

Abundant Life

In these past weeks, I have shared many conversations on the phone where 'Lockdown' is being 'locked up' and we ask, 'When are we going to be let out?' There are many things we cannot do; enjoy coffee with a friend, window shop, go to the office, go to church. Doors are shut. Gates on parks are locked and even gates on driveways are pulled to.

Everywhere is closed. It is easy to get into a mindset where doors are there to keep out rather than to open and welcome in.

Jesus describes himself as the shepherd who enters the sheepfold by the Gate and leads the sheep into the safety of the Fold; the walls and the protection of the Shepherd keep the sheep secure and their enemies (bad weather, wolves, even thieves and bandits) out. The thieves and bandits are others who may not have the sheep's best interests at heart, whereas Jesus is The Good Shepherd who will even lay down his life for the Sheep.

The disciples don't understand what Jesus is trying to tell them, so he has another go. 'I am the Gate' (or the door) - and 'whoever enters by me will be saved.... I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.'

We are back to how we picture a gate or a door, is it open or closed? Is it there to keep us out or let us in? Whoever we are, we can be tempted to envisage a Jesus who is saying- if you believe me, you are saved, get in the fold and I will

protect you from those outside the flock. And if we think of ourselves as outside the fold, the gate may seem shut. If we are not careful, we are left with a small fold, a few sheep and a small Jesus.

I think we need to ask more questions. What are walls for? Well, the walls protect the sheep and help keep the leaders who would mistreat the sheep out - but note they are not designed to keep out other sheep who can respond to the Shepherd's voice. What does the gate do? This is an easy one - the gate is open for the Good Shepherd to see that the sheep have pasture and gain the sustenance they need every day. And who are the sheep? Not just the sheep in the fold, because verse 16 tells us, 'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also'.

Picture the sheepfold with the gate open, with the Good Shepherd waiting..... Waiting for everyone to have life..... and have it abundantly..... Notice there are two bits - 'To have life' and then comes the mention of abundance. 'Having life' is not just life after death. Jesus came that we might have 'everlasting life' and that starts in the present - now. Neither does having 'life abundantly' necessarily mean a good length of life. Christianity is not like a new fridge-freezer - it does not come with a guarantee of so many years of working life. God is not an insurance company who we ring up and the deal is that he simply puts the parts that are in disrepair into good working order again. Certainly, 'life in abundance' did not work like that for the first disciples - most of whom were persecuted and martyred for their faith. And we, too, can easily be reminded that there are no guarantees of this sort - in a pandemic everyone becomes all too aware that a long life cannot be taken for granted and we cannot all escape life threatening illness.

So, Jesus must have been talking about the quality of life. And what is a good quality life? A life with material comforts, family life sorted, security in the bank; a life with civil rights – a good education, freedom from discrimination and the freedom to vote; good health and good career prospects? Lots of us, in fact huge numbers of us from all nationalities and walks of life, do not have this kind of prosperity. And those who do have these things, do not always feel life is great. So, in following Jesus, the Good Shepherd, quality of life must mean something else.

The disciples who had followed Jesus for three years had seen their hopes for a better life dashed and their life of being on the road with Jesus seemed to be gone. Many of them were away from their village homes and livelihoods. They were in transition; no longer able to trust their traditional leaders, still missing Jesus' physical presence and being asked to trust in the Holy Spirit. What did they do? Despair at society, do nothing, vent their anger on others or look out for themselves? No, they rejected power politics and violence, individualism and rebellion, cynicism about humanity and fatalism about the world.

'They devoted themselves to the teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers'. They looked after those in need. 'They spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.' (Acts 2: 38-42). They came to see that 'Christ is risen' means that Christ was walking alongside each one of them in the very midst of their community.

Picture the radical shift in the lives of these disciples to a life

lived in community and shaped in response to the call of Jesus, the shepherd. A life shaped by their trust and hope in what they continued to learn from and with their Lord. They saw that the gate was open. Now picture a radical shift in our own lives attracted to this same community of generosity, mutuality, and fellowship; where people seek cooperation, not division, and work towards provision for all; where inner, spiritual joy and peace are valued over material success; where we are open to each other and to God, where we can all be part of the change.



Melanie Seward, Lay Reader