

I AM THE SHEPHERD AND THE GATE

Acts 2. 42-47

1 Peter 2. 19-25

John 10. 1-10

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

When many people read chapter 10 of St John's gospel, they might not be aware of one very important fact; which is that in our Lord's day, shepherds stood on the bottom rung of the Palestinian social ladder. They shared the same unenviable status as tax collectors and dung sweepers.

Previously, during the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, shepherding was a noble occupation. Shepherds are mentioned early in Genesis,¹ where Jabal is called the father of those living in tents and raising livestock. In nomadic societies everyone, whether sheikh or slave, was a shepherd. The wealthy sons of Isaac and Jacob tended flocks;² and Jethro, the priest of Midian and the father-in-law of Moses, employed his daughters as shepherdesses.³

But when the twelve tribes of Israel migrated to Egypt, they encountered a lifestyle that was foreign to them. The Egyptians were agriculturalists. As farmers they despised shepherding, because sheep and goats meant death to crops. Battles between farmers and shepherds were frequent and fierce;⁴ and the Egyptians considered sheep worthless for food and sacrifice.

In the course of 400 years, the Egyptians prejudiced the Israelites' attitude toward shepherding. Jacob's descendants became accustomed to a settled lifestyle and

¹ Cf. 4. 20.

² Cf. Gen 30. 29, 37. 12.

³ Cf. Ex 2. 16.

⁴ Indeed, the first murder in history erupted from a farmer's resentment of a shepherd. Cf. Gen 4. 1-8.

forgot their nomadic roots. After the Israelites settled in Palestine, shepherding ceased to hold its prominent position; and as they acquired more farmland, pasturing decreased. Shepherding became a menial vocation for the labouring class.

Shepherding had not just lost its widespread appeal; it eventually forfeited its social acceptability. Some shepherds earned their poor reputations because of their tendency to steal sheep from the flocks of others; but other shepherds became the victims of a cruel stereotype. The Jewish religious leaders maligned the shepherds' good name; and rabbis even banned pasturing sheep and goats in Israel, except on desert plains.

The Mishnah, Judaism's written record of the oral law, also reflects this prejudice, referring to shepherds in belittling terms. One passage describes them as 'incompetent'; another says that 'no one should ever feel obligated to rescue a shepherd who has fallen into a pit'. In Jesus's time, shepherds were deprived of all civil rights. They could not fulfil judicial offices or be admitted in court as witnesses. Indeed, to buy wool, milk or a kid from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would be stolen property.

It is in this social context of religious snobbery and class prejudice that Christ launches his surprising and revolutionary claim to be the shepherd of the sheep. What's more, our Lord claims that he is the shepherd who knows his sheep by name and who leads them; and that his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

As he continues his discourse in St John's gospel, Jesus proclaims that he, the shepherd, is also the *gate* for the sheep. In villages and towns in the Middle East, communal sheepfolds existed for the protection of the sheep at night. Such sheepfolds were protected by a strong door; and only the guardian had a key.

If you lived in the countryside, the sheepfolds were walled areas out in open landscape. Often the wall was topped with briars. The entrance to the sheepfold was a single opening without a gate or a door. In the evening, the shepherd would bring his flock back to the sheepfold, put some briars across its entrance and then lie down there himself.

We can now see that the only way in to the sheepfold was the shepherd: he actually served as the gate or the door. When Christ described himself as the ‘gate’ and the ‘shepherd’, his hearers understood these two terms to refer to the same person. When our Lord said, ‘I am the gate’, he was conveying four different ideas to his hearers.

The first idea was that the gate as a symbol of protection. During the day, the sheepfold is open, but when night falls and the flock are inside, it is closed. In the same way, city gates were closed at night to protect people from invasion or illegal entry. According to Middle Eastern hospitality, a person was safe overnight once he was received into a tent or house. The door might be flimsy; it might not be very thick; but it represented safety and care. Until the morning, and until the darkness passed, the guest would be looked after and defended by his host. Gates and doors are not only entrances; they are also a protection from danger. In saying that he is the gate, Jesus puts himself between us and that which would destroy us. Christ is available to defend us from evil and at the same time to encircle us with his love.

In using the word ‘gate’, the second idea that our Lord wanted to communicate was that of access. Through Jesus, we have access to God. As St Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus about our Lord, ‘so he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father’ (Eph 2. 17-18). It is our relationship with Christ that is our opening to a deeper awareness of the presence of God and to his kingdom.

Our Lord opens the way for us by showing that God is a God of love; and that God gives himself to us and for us. To know Jesus is to know the Father; to know Jesus is to discover the heart of God.

But we can go further. In this passage, the third (and very precise) idea is that the gate is the way to salvation. Christ says, 'I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved.' Indeed, later on in St John's gospel we will read that our Lord came to the world so that we 'may not perish, but may have eternal life' (Jn 3. 16). All of us who have been separated from God by our wrongdoings and sin have the glorious privilege of seeing that our Lord is an open (and not a closed) door (or gate) to salvation and to a restored relationship with God. And when we fall and stumble, he does not reprimand us and close the gate; the gate remains open, and we are able through him to receive grace, pardon and forgiveness.

There are some people who, when they think of Jesus as the gate, think that somehow this gate is situated on another level; that is, in order to have access to God, in order to receive salvation and all of its blessings, one has to better oneself and place oneself on another level, as it were. But no, this gate is on 'street level'. It is a gate that is open for 'failing saints' like you and me. Christ is the gate at street level that is open to receive us just as we are; and with all our failures.

Finally, the fourth idea that our Lord wants to convey in using the word 'gate' is that he is the 'gate' to life. He says on one hand, 'Whoever enters by me will be saved, and come in and go out and find pasture'; and 'I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly'. Jesus is the mediator who will provide what the sheep need for life. The thief comes in only to steal, kill and destroy the sheep. Christ has come so that the sheep may have pasture, and thus have life and have it abundantly. He is the gate through whom sheep enter the sheepfold, and are saved; and he is the gate through which the sheep go out, and have access to good pasture.

Those of us who are our Lord's sheep are not his prisoners. He gives us the freedom to leave the sheepfold and to come back. He saves us from destruction and gives us the power to go out and find pasture. This is an image of what our God does for us. As the Psalmist wrote, 'The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore' (Ps 121. 7, 8).

Amen.