

ABUNDANT LIFE

Acts 2. 42-47
1 Peter 2. 19-25
John 10. 1-10

In one of those sermons that bring the biblical world ‘down to earth’, a priest I know once talked about his life in Africa.

He told us how the people in one of the villages where he was serving knew each other's sheep the way we might know one another's children. As the priest sat in a group in the village, a person would stop by and say, ‘Have you seen my sheep so-and-so?’, identifying his own sheep by name. ‘Through the dark night my friend heard villagers calling out names. ‘They are calling their sheep’, one of the locals told him. ‘They will all find each other’.

This feature of village life in a place small enough and close enough where folks know which sheep are theirs and which belong to someone else, where sheep themselves know to whom they belong, was as familiar to our Lord as it is unfamiliar to us. In this portion of chapter 10 of St John’s gospel, as Jesus tries to describe the connection between himself and his followers, he uses images that he hopes will touch the hearts and minds of his hearers. These images should touch our hearts and minds as well.

In the preceding chapters of John’s gospel, the people who have been listening to Christ and witnessing his ministry are puzzled and unsettled. They have been asking themselves, ‘Who is he? How can we trust him? Is he really from God, or simply some new charlatan in town?’ Our Lord answers these questions both pragmatically and poetically. Pragmatically, he shows people that he does things that God alone or one who is blessed by God can do. And he describes the blessing he brings from God in poetic terms.

In the first part of the passage, Jesus identifies himself as the true shepherd. Sheep farming was a regular part of life in Palestine, and sheep and shepherds would have been well-known images for Christ's hearers. Our Lord, of course, was speaking figuratively, saying that he is the good shepherd, in contrast to the many selfish and uncaring leaders and kings that Israel had suffered under in the past.¹ However, in verse 6 the narrator explains to us that Jesus's hearers did not understand his figure of speech; and therefore Christ offers another way to understand his relationship to the people: he says, 'I am 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. But 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 our Lord described himself as both the 'shepherd' and the 'gate', his hearers understood these two terms to refer to the same person.

We can observe several interesting things about the shepherd with whom Jesus identifies himself. Firstly, this shepherd has the well-being of the sheep at heart, rather than his own well-being. This shepherd is neither a thief nor a bandit who would steal sheep. Christ emphasises a particular difference between the bandit and the shepherd: the shepherd enters rightly, properly and openly into the sheepfold. It is appropriate for him to come and call his sheep and he does so, consistently entering through the door. All is open and above-board; there is an obliging doorkeeper and sheep who respond to the sound of their names. There is a

¹ Cf. Ezek 34.

relationship of trust among all parties here. Notice, too, that the sheep are not presented as totally dumb. They hear; they follow; and they flee from false shepherds. They are able to ‘know’ whom to trust.

Their trust is validated and emphasised by another aspect of the shepherd's behaviour: he brings the sheep out of the fold and then goes before them. The sheep do not simply escape some confinement, or hasten out of the fold in order to brave the larger world on their own. Their shepherd leads them out and then goes before them, in front of them, to lead. The sheep are not abandoned.

To press this image in his hearers’ minds, our Lord repeats himself and says to them, ‘I am the gate’; that is: I am the proper way, the right way, the only way into the sheepfold. Pasture, that is, *life*, is through me, the door. Those who enter the sheepfold are being saved; and as they are led out, they are being brought into pasture and life rather than being snatched up for their destruction.

We see, then, that there is no problem in describing Jesus as both shepherd and gate. Rather, Christ speaks of the gate in order to help clarify the image of the shepherd. In both cases, it is about the one who is trustworthy. Our Lord is both leader and path; and he brings his followers into ample pasture. He is the good shepherd,² the one whose work and life are for the sheep and their well-being. He is the right way and the true way to enter into the fulness of life.

Today, more than ever, let us listen for the Shepherd’s voice. Let us respond to him as he calls us by name. Let us follow him as he leads us into new life.

Amen.

² Cf. Ps 23.