

Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Easter (03.05.20)

Revd Steph Nadarajah

I must say, it was a relief to be reminded in our passage from John's Gospel today that even Jesus the master teacher found that he wasn't always able to get his message across. On many occasions in the Gospels, we have the impression of Jesus throwing up his arms in despair, or putting his head in his hands, or losing his temper completely. 'Why do you not understand what I say?' he cries, a couple of chapters earlier in John. Yes, Jesus, I hear you, as I find myself trying to explain the workings of the analogue clock and using buttons to demonstrate what I consider to be very simple fractions...

But Jesus begins by painting a picture of a sheepfold, which is (like any other) vulnerable to sheep rustlers. In contrast, the shepherd of the sheep will always enter through the gate, and the sheep will recognise his voice and follow him. But when the Pharisees and the others who were listening fail to understand what Jesus is saying, like any good teacher (a real teacher that is, and not a desperate home school teacher whose toolbox of illustrations may be woefully lacking), Jesus reaches for another metaphor - another image - to stretch the parable a little further.

Only, this one isn't quite the image we might have been expecting. On seven occasions in John's Gospel, Jesus compares himself to something that the people around him could understand from their everyday lives. These are known as the 'I-AM' sayings. Prior to this point, Jesus has described himself both as the Bread of Life and as the Light of the World. And now, Jesus says, 'Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.' The gate? Or, more literally, the door? It's a surprising comparison and not the most immediate image of Jesus that comes to mind.

The truth is that many of us would prefer to fast forward a bit to verse 11, which isn't offered to us today, but in which Jesus says 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.' This is the image we're perhaps more familiar with. It's always been a favourite: the image of Jesus the good shepherd is one of the earliest to be depicted in Christian art, from as early as 50AD. Jesus the good shepherd is surely also the Jesus we want now, in these strange and unsettling days. Jesus the good shepherd, who will meet our longing to be *led out from here*, into safe, green pastures and better times.

In truth, we know that Jesus is the shepherd, the gate and the holy Lamb of God. But it's the image of Jesus the gate that we're given to ponder on today. And the more I pondered this week, the more I kept coming back to the sheepfold that Jesus started with. Now, I'm south London born and bred, and certainly not of farming stock, but it's the precarious situation of the sheep to which I find myself particularly drawn, right now.

Like the sheep, I feel exposed, vulnerable and dependent. I am all too aware of the thieves and bandits that circle around me: not literally, of course, but those inclinations which seek to reinforce my sense of separation, those voices that would deny and steal my peace. As I lamented with a friend last week about the frequent feelings of inadequacy, she reminded me that 'comparison is the thief of joy.' The thief indeed – and there are lots of those. Just like the sheep cautiously listening for the shepherd, I find myself turning as often as I can to prayer – snatching moments here and there, longer periods when I can – and straining to hear, instead, the voice of goodness, love and mercy.

It's also the togetherness of the sheep that resonates with me deeply. In this perilous place of lurking danger, the sheep share a common life that's centred around the shepherd. And this sense of togetherness is also reflected in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Jesus has returned to his Father, the Holy Spirit is in the midst of his followers and this newly formed group are spending lots of time together deepening the bonds of fellowship. They're sharing what they have, breaking bread together, living with glad and generous hearts, praying and experiencing signs and wonders.

It's no coincidence that some of these features of the early Christian movement are making an appearance here in lockdown. Many people are seeking a sense of togetherness and deepening the bonds of fellowship: whether through shopping for isolated neighbours, planning street parties commemorating VE Day, or virtual pub quizzes with family and friends. And if my social media feed is anything to go by, countless others are seeking solace in bread-making and bread breaking, whether they can find some yeast or not. Make of that what you will. It suggests to me that the images and symbols Jesus offers us echo deep within the human spirit.

And when we stay with the sheep – when we stay with that sense both of precariousness and togetherness - I think the image of Jesus as the gate, the door, begins to take hold in our imagination. Much earlier in the Bible, the author of Psalm 121 writes, ‘I lift my eyes to the hills – from where shall my help come?’ I’m sure, like me, you’ve asked this question of God a number of times over the last six weeks. But instead of scanning the horizon for Jesus the good shepherd who will lead us to salvation, perhaps we could let Jesus be our passageway through all of this instead.

The terrain may be hostile and the shadows long, but Jesus is the one through whom we move. Jesus the gate, who keeps our coming in and our going out. Jesus the gate, who opens wide his arms and cradles the ebb and flow of our lives. We can be certain that the abundance of life he promises doesn’t lie in security, safety or easy contentment, and we know that when we come to gather again, the flock that makes it home will be a little smaller. But as we journey together through the gate that is our Lord Jesus Christ, we do so with the Easter confidence that this abundance of life is always more than we could ever have asked for or imagined.

Amen.