



## **A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell**

Sunday, May 3, 2020

Scripture Passages: 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2: 19-25 & John 10:1-10

*+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

About 15 years ago, we were on one of our family holidays in south-west England – in Wiltshire. We were taking a walk with the kids - trying to wear them out with a good yomp – as you do with four children under 12. That day we took them to the site of the Westbury White Horse – a possibly 9th century hill figure carved into the chalk high above the town of Westbury. It's a great site.

It's also covered with herds of sheep.

So not knowing any better our middle son Andrew – about 5 or 6 at the time went running into the herd of sheep scattering them. City Kid. And I remember him come running back to us to ask “Mama, are these wild sheep?” Totally reasonable question from a 5 or 6 year-old. But of course our response was to gently make a joke of the “wild sheep” because of course it's preposterous that sheep could be wild – they are fundamentally without any protection. They wouldn't last a second without their caretakers and protectors, shepherds. Enter the Good Shepherd.

This image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is a bedrock image of the Messiah. We hear about it in the prophet Isaiah and Jesus himself invests a lot of time in the image. And of course it's so familiar to us – perhaps it's one of the first identities of Jesus we learned about at our parents' knee – Jesus, lovingly holding a lamb across his shoulders. But it is anything but a childish image.

Because although it may have been learned and internalized in childhood, it releases much deeper truths as we grow in understanding and experience on our Christian journey. It's probably a good idea to take a look at those sheep again.

So item 1: sheep are not wild. In fact, they're highly vulnerable creatures – no pointy teeth or claws to defend themselves with. They would quickly die out on their own either by fox or by misadventure or just plain exposure without

protection. They need the safety of occasional enclosure; the certainty of daily meals - and the company of the flock.

They're also not God's brightest creatures, it has to be said. They have a kind of herd mentality. But they're loyal and they stick together - and they're great followers with the aid of a sheepdog or two. They're inclined to wander if they aren't supervised with the odd growl or baring of teeth.

But it's their relationship with the shepherd that's really interesting - and really this is what is at the heart of what Jesus is speaking about. The sheep do actually respond to the Shepherd's voice. In fact they're deeply dependent upon knowing that voice.

I've had the pleasure of observing this in the country. It's instructive to see - touching almost. By experience shepherds or farmers know exactly how to call them. And the sheep find security in that voice. The farmer (these days) is the one that protects them, feeds them. For their part they are completely - even radically - dependent on that protection and guidance.

You can see why in an agrarian society that the image of sheep and shepherds was so full of meaning - it was just part of life - as it still is in many places. In fact, the frequency of the sheep and shepherd metaphor in the Bible shows us its power as a defining image. And it turns out that it was deeply ingrained not only in Christian culture, but, as scholars point out, in ancient near eastern culture in general.

So Jesus says, "I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for— will freely go in and out, and find pasture." Of course, Jesus is speaking in metaphor. But his words have huge importance.

He's saying that only through him is salvation possible. That is an exclusive statement - there's no getting round that one. Nor is there any getting round the other six I AM statements - all exclusive, that we find in John's Gospel. So this needs some unpacking - because we're not so comfortable with exclusivity. But just a spoiler folks: it's a thing and it requires a decision from us at some point. I can't explain that problem away. That's for you to pray about.

But I can try and shed a little light on what Jesus is saying here. So I'm going to need to go a bit backward and a bit forward to draw out the sense - bear with me - it's worth it because it's important.

Backward first:

The first thing we need to know - and if you've got your bible handy, you might want to have a look at this for yourself - so the first thing we need to know is that this I AM statement is a deeply dependent statement. Jesus has just had an altercation with the Pharisees - that's code for Professional Religious. He'd just restored sight to a blind man - a miraculous and wonderful healing - you might remember that we read this scripture back in Lent.

And Jesus believes them to be wrong in their reaction to the miracle. If they're convinced at all that he did it in the first place, they've decided to be shocked and outraged that he dared to do this work of healing. So they'd rather concentrate on that instead of celebrating the fact that God is working right in front of their noses. They'd rather fight about the legitimacy of the healing than rejoice in the man's sightedness. I reckon that's because they can't control that event and they can't control Jesus.

Jesus is trying to expand their frame of reference – to lift their heads from rules to observe the Grace of an uncontrollable God; to let go of their rigidity and allow God's love to be the law. But in all that, he still wasn't looking to throw out the playbook - what Jesus wants is an expansion of their understanding of the covenant. He wants the fullest, most loving interpretation of law and scripture – every time that is what we see and hear from him.

And we hear that from him because that is the content of God's love for us – Jesus came to show us how God's love looks and feels – and it's like this: expansive and profoundly loving. That brings life – not just the mundanity and predictability of one day after another: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, . . . but abundant life. And we know what that means because he modeled it for us. It means life poured out for others. It means a fundamental orientation toward generosity, sharing ourselves with others. He means love, not rigidity. But neither does he mean an undisciplined existence.

But you see, this way is scary. It's not certain. It doesn't consist of unchanging rules we can point to. It means we're always on a journey – never standing still as the community of faith. It means we have to think our way into understanding where the Good Shepherd is leading us and why - and that is a constant process. The Holy Spirit is constantly working – She's working in the deeps - to lead us in God's way, not our way. And it's jolly hard work, faith work, trust work, heart work and head work to follow her.

But back to that gate. Now it seems the disciples don't seem to completely understand the shepherd thing, so Jesus intensifies it by stating that not only is he the shepherd, but he is also the gate through which the sheep must pass - it's the only legitimate way into or out of the pasture – the place of safety and protection. Now this would have made sense to them in a way that it doesn't much to us.

The type of sheep pen Jesus was speaking about was probably nothing more than a rough circle of rocks piled into a wall with a small open space to enter. The shepherd would drive the sheep through it at nightfall. And, since there was no gate to close—just an opening—the shepherd would keep the sheep in and wild animals out by lying across the opening. He would sleep there, and would literally become the door to the sheep. I think that really helps to see it in your mind's eye like that.

And just so we really, really get it, Jesus makes a crucial comparison between the attitude of the Good Shepherd and the attitude of one who is paid to be a shepherd – a hired hand. Jesus' implication here is that the hired hand doesn't have the flock's care at the centre of his concerns. The hired hand speaks with an unfamiliar voice that the sheep may not recognize. The hired hand leaves the sheep vulnerable to the threats in their world – the wolf. Because he has no stake in the sheep – not being their owner, the hired hand leaves the sheep alone in the face of a threat – something no good shepherd would do. But the hired hand really doesn't care for the sheep. He has no real love for those sheep. He's just after his paycheque. Of course, he's most likely making a comparison between thieves and brigands and the Pharisees here.

He was accusing the Jewish leaders of endangering the people entrusted to them by preaching news that was not Good News – an anti-Gospel. By contrast to these false prophets the Good Shepherd stands firm, undaunted by danger, not intimidated by threats. He stands firm and meets danger because his motivation is love for the sheep.

So, what seems to many a romantic and gentle image of the Good Shepherd is in fact a very theologically and politically dangerous statement. Words like 'thief', 'brigand', 'fleeing', 'steal and slaughter and kill' that run all the way through this story and they tell us that Jesus was being pretty serious and risking a fair bit. It turns out that these images – of the shepherd and sheep, are not as gentle as our childhood recollections.

These lines have incredibly urgent and present importance for us too. They warn us to look out for dangers in our own time – for the seductive and alternative voices that pull us from Jesus and seduce us with easy answers – these words of Jesus warn us to recognize that these dangers will sometimes present themselves as religiously plausible to us.

I think that here Jesus speaks very realistically of the temptations of other paths, other voices – other ways of living and believing that hold out the promise of light in this world. Ways that are easier – ways that don't ask quite as much of us as Jesus asks.

The promise of an easier journey is tempting. But as Jesus says, ultimately "the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly". Ultimately we know that the ways of thieves and bandits and hired hands will steal our light and dull our experience of life. They are life-taking while Jesus comes to give us life.

That leads us to today – right now.

Good Shepherd Sunday is also known as Vocations Sunday. I know we usually think of vocations in terms of the three-fold order of ministry and that's right and good. But let's just take a leaf out of Jesus' book and expand our frame of reference a bit. How about we talk about the Christian vocation full stop. We all have a vocation – and it takes different forms for us all.

*A Homily Preached by the Bishop of Niagara  
on Sunday, May 3, 2020 via Facebook Live*

And what I know – and what we all feel - is that we are in a challenging but also very important time for the Church.

It has us asking some tricky questions – wondering, what new and unforeseen needs that are being revealed are shaping our vocations; and what changes and hardships are reshaping our communities right now?

Well I reckon that's not a bad place to be on Good Shepherd – or Vocations – Sunday.

The question is - where is Jesus leading us? And I have to say that's a rather easier question than the next one: Will we follow?

Now that's a tough question.

We do have things to think and speak about. But I would challenge us to do one thing more – the most important thing actually – and that is to listen – really listen for our Great Shepherd's voice. Be that in a personal realm or in our church.

What is it we are being called to do by the Great Shepherd in this time and after?

To me, this reading about the sheep knowing the voice of its master makes me think of other incidents – of the other “knowings” - in the Gospels that we've been reading over these past weeks: of Mary and Jesus in the Easter garden – when Jesus called Mary's name and she suddenly knew him - of Thomas whose cry of recognition “My Lord and my God!” when seeing Jesus and knowing that all the disciples had told him was true, that Jesus really was alive and present to him - and also when the disciples on the road to Emmaus realized who they'd been conversing with. When Jesus broke bread with them, they knew him - Did not our hearts burn within us as he opened the scriptures to us?, they said Did we not recognize his voice, did we not hear his truth?

Here's the thing: I think this tells us that even in the midst of the fog of uncertainty and even when life circumstances and the people round us cause us to be confused; even when we are beset by skepticism and doubt – even when all of these things happen to us all at times, because we have been formed and shaped by Jesus' voice, because we have been dependent on his care and protection and most especially because there is no other way to pass through this life safely but more importantly with an abundance of joy and meaning, we will always be called forward by the voice of the great Shepherd of the sheep who has laid down his life for us.

*+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*