

A Reflection on the Word by our lay-reader, Karen Chaplin - 26th April 2026

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Text for today: John 10.1 – 10

Today's gospel reading is one with which we might be very familiar, and I confess I have often skipped over it, like O yes, I know what this bit means. And yet whilst so doing I have often had the sense that there is more to it, if only I gave it sufficient time and prayer. So I was very happy when it came up as one of today's readings, to make the opportunity to give it some of the attention it deserves.

So having started with the big question - what is this passage about? - today I can offer you no answers, only more questions. Which is not in itself a bad thing as long as the new questions have moved us forward in some way.

My starting premise is that the passage may be divided into three sections:

- 1) Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in another way is a thief and a bandit;
- 2) The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him. The sheep know his voice and they follow him;
- 3) I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

And my hitherto cursory understanding of these passages are

- Only Jesus has the word of truth by which we can be saved;
- Mixed up with ideas of the Good Shepherd who will look for the one that is lost and even lay down his life for the sheep;
- The sheep are the people – believers then and now, including us.
- And when Jesus says I am the gate, that aligns with No-one comes to the Father, except through me.

So then I did some research. One of my books ("Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus", by Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg) contains the following observation:

One day while walking on a road near Bethlehem [she] watched as three shepherds converged with their separate flocks of sheep. The three men hailed each other and then stopped to talk. While they were conversing their sheep intermingled, melting into one big flock. Wondering how the three shepherds would ever be able to identify their own sheep [she] waited until the men were ready to say their good-byes. She watched, fascinated, as each of the shepherds called out to his sheep. At the sound of their shepherd's voice, like magic, the sheep separated again into three flocks. Apparently some things in Israel haven't changed for thousands of years.

So there is real evidence supporting the idea of the sheep both recognising the voice of their shepherd, and following said shepherd.

The question we have to ask then is, if Jesus is our shepherd, do we recognise his voice? How would we recognise it? And having recognised it would we then follow him?

Other research suggests that sheep would be brought into stone or fenced enclosures at night for safety. Sometimes the shepherd would sleep across the gate to protect the sheep from intruders, and to keep them from wandering out; and then he would let them out again to graze at daylight.

This seems entirely reasonable, but yet I have to say I have a couple more niggling questions.

The first arises from Luke's telling of the Christmas narrative:

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night....

Maybe I'm being picky, but Luke doesn't say anything about sheep pens; although if the sheep were in pens that might explain why they didn't run off when the angel of the Lord appeared in front of them, or possibly why the shepherds were not quite so worried about leaving the penned up sheep to go into Bethlehem.

Maybe my image of hilltop shepherds watching over the flocks on the slopes below isn't as accurate as I'd like to think.

And maybe not all sheep were equally well cared for.

And this brings us to my second slight niggle. It seems from a wider reading of the text that Jesus was probably in or close to Jerusalem when he said these sayings. It's not definitive, but quite possible.

Now the heart of Jerusalem, even under Roman occupation, was the Temple, where the great Jewish religious festivals were still being observed. One of the great features of these festivals – and of Jewish daily life – was bringing animals to sacrifice at the Temple. Cattle, sheep, goats – there would have been major local industries breeding and supplying animals for this purpose.

In the north wall of the city was a gate called The Sheep Gate, through which said animals would be brought to the temple. Maybe I'm being fanciful, but I can't help wondering if this was the gate which Jesus was referring to when he said I am the gate for the sheep.

For those sheep, going through The Sheep Gate was a one way journey. But Jesus' sacrifice on the cross has put an end to all sacrifices, they are no longer needed. The sheep are free to come in and go out as they please – we are liberated from the power of death.

I said at the outset that I didn't have any answers today, only questions; and perhaps these two warrant further personal reflection (you may have others)

1. Do we need to put our trust in sheep pens and other man-made edifices, when we have the Good Shepherd to watch over us?
2. How can we, as individuals, learn to recognise Jesus' voice and follow his call? I could say, through prayer and reading Scripture and carrying out acts of service, but what does that actually mean for you?