

The Good Shepherd

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

A shepherd was herding his flock in a remote pasture when suddenly a brand new BMW4x4 appeared. The driver, a young man in expensive designer clothes, and wearing Ray Ban sunglasses leaned out of the window and asked our shepherd: "If I can tell you exactly how many sheep you have in your flock, will you give me one?"

The shepherd looks at the yuppie, then at his peacefully grazing flock and calmly answers, "Sure!"

The yuppie parks the car, whips out his notebook, connects it to a cell-phone, surfs to a NASA page on the Internet where he calls up a GPS satellite navigation system, scans the area, opens up a database and some 60 Excel spreadsheets with complex formulas. Finally he prints out a 150 page report on his hi-tech miniaturized printer, turns round to our shepherd and says: "You have here exactly 1586 sheep!"

"This is correct. As agreed, you can take one of the sheep," says the shepherd. He watches the young man make a selection and bundle into the back of his car. Then he says: "If I can tell you exactly what your business is, will you give me my sheep back?"

"Ok, why not?" answers the young man. "You are a consultant," says the shepherd. "This is correct," says the yuppie, "How did you guess that?"

"Easy," answers the shepherd. "You turn up here, although nobody called you. You want to be paid for the answer to a question I already knew the solution to; and you don't know *diddly squat* about my business now give me back my dog."

TODAY IS COMMONLY KNOWN is commonly known as "Good Shepherd Sunday". It is also known as "Vocations Sunday", a day when our Church prays especially for new shepherds and pastors to lead the Christian communities. Today we are asked to "pray" for vocations. There is a danger that, although many will fervently do so, they will be praying for other people's vocations and not their own. To make this prayer with sincerity involves reflecting on how God is asking us to make a meaningful contribution of ourselves to the building up of our communities, our parishes.

The image of God as the shepherd of his people has a long tradition in the history of God's people. Through his compassionate care of them, God's

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people “will know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people... And you are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord God” (Ezekiel 34:30-31). The image would have been well understood by the people who heard Jesus speak.

The shepherd of the Middle East is somewhat different from, say, sheep ranchers of the Australian outback, rounding up on horseback thousands of animals. Or the farmers in Pass who throw the sheepdogs out of their trucks and wait while they rush over the hills to bring the sheep back! If one goes missing, it is hardly noticed. The shepherd of the biblical Middle East had a much more intimate relationship with a much smaller flock. He would bring them out to pasture each day and spend all his time with them. In the evening he would bring them back to the enclosure where they would be safe from preying animals. He knew each one individually and would notice immediately if even one was missing. Jesus’ parable of the Lost Sheep would have resonated perfectly with his hearers. The imagery is old. The message is topical. It is relevant to us. In order to enter eternal life we must listen to Jesus and obey him.

We have to tune our minds to the sound of his voice. Self-centredness can make us deaf to the voice of Jesus. Easy options can lead us to abandon Christian principles. But God is faithful and will not let us be tempted beyond our strength. No one can drag us away from him, The Father has entrusted us to his Son. The same God who kept faith with Jesus by raising him from the dead will also raise us by his power.

In today’s Gospel there seem to be two separate parables. The first is a warning against people who would want to steal the sheep and the second focuses on the relationship between the sheep and their shepherd. It is a free relationship. The sheep go in and out. They follow, not because they are forced to but by their own choice. It is a complicated passage, in that Jesus identifies himself as being the Good Shepherd, the Gatekeeper, **and even** the Gate to the sheep-fold.

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The shepherds of Jesus' day endured sun and rain for days or weeks on end, ever vigilant and uncomplaining, watching for danger and trouble, providing pasture and allaying the thirst of their flocks. The shepherd knew his sheep as no one else. And the sheep followed him, as Jesus tells us, "because they know his voice."

Jesus spoke of himself as "the gate for the sheep." Apparently, shepherds of the period would often place their own bodies across the small opening or aperture of the sheep enclosure during times of peril, risking their lives for the sake of their flock. So Jesus is perhaps using this image of the shepherd as human gate that as a metaphor for his own presence stretched out, as on a cross, bridging the disciples' –and our own — base insecurities.

"Whoever enters by me," he assures us, "will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." FREEDOM!

We might from time to time lose direction - lose our bearings - and a sense of who we are and where we are going in our lives. It is all too easy to go astray like lost sheep. But it is just then that we are most vulnerable to the "thieves and bandits" of the world, most vulnerable to the more destructive animal instincts that lurk in every human heart, our own included.

It's not easy being called sheep. Sheep have become the symbol, in our culture, of mindless compliance with societal norms. Jesus, however, seems to credit sheep with a good deal more sense – in any case, with the one important sense of knowing their shepherd's voice. Important not because the sheep are followers in their essence, but because they are wanderers by nature. And sensible not because the sheep are dim enough to follow any voice, but discerning enough to follow only the right voice. That discerning ear matters because the sheep are facing real dangers, from without and from within. We bleat and complain about the wolves! But then, all of us is capable of sin and hurt. There are always creatures at war within our hearts, hidden beneath our tasteful appearances.

Jesus promises that with the Lord as our shepherd, we will "come in and go out and find pasture." Outside the fold, sheep are under threat from predators. The biggest risk comes from the sheep themselves – they are apt to wander off, each to its own way.

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We all want to be those people who “come in and go out.” We all want to experience that kind of freedom. We all want to experience the kind of care and protection described by Jesus and by Luke in the Book of Acts. Jesus is the one who promises this kind of protection to all who desire to be a part of his flock.

What gates do you enter and exit in your life, both real ones and allegorical ones? And who are the gatekeepers? Do you see them as compassionate and Christ-like; or as robbers and thieves? What do those gatekeepers offer you? Is it worth the price to enter? A lot depends on how much we want to enter, doesn't it? It is amazing, the price many of us are willing to pay to get our strokes, our affection, our earthly rewards, our fulfilment for here and now.

It cannot be a surprise to any of us that The Kingdom is available NOW. The gate is there for us to enter! That does mean of course that we have to put all your trust in Jesus the Christ, the good gatekeeper. It's only thing that one doesn't have to save up for – you can have it now!
Oh! The freedom to come and go!

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not be encumbered once more by a yoke of slavery. *Galatians 5.1*

Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free
(Chorus; Spiritual Trilogy – Odetta Holmes)

We read about freedom, dream about freedom, rejoice in the notion of freedom, teach, advocate, and hope for freedom, but what do we mean by freedom? We bleat about political freedoms and economic freedoms
What then is this “true” freedom? There are two kinds of freedom:
Freedom To --- and **Freedom From!**

The human heart is free to choose whatever it desires. But here's the catch — the human heart is easily corrupted and our thoughts, words, and actions become tainted in various degrees with pride and rebellion against God. Always, outside our Lord's protection we are in danger of losing our souls to the “wolves”

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Our world today is still untamed and full of conflict. It is a dangerous place, wherever we live. Despite its thin veneer of order and discipline, humankind remains as messy and chaotic as is a flock of sheep without a shepherd. And, the world today still has its share of “thieves and bandits,” as Jesus calls them in our Gospel account today, ready to snatch and scatter the flock.

Our Gospel passage ends with one of Jesus’ most beautiful statements: “I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.” To follow Jesus is not, as some seem to fear, to live a half-life, a life filled with endlessly dire warnings of “Don’t!”. It is to live life, our human life, to the greatest possible fullness. As one writer puts it, “Life with God is good for human beings and should be seen to be so.” Our Vocation consists in making this clear by the way we speak and live.