

The Open Gate
Easter 4
7 May 2017
Revd Jenny Wilkens
Acts 2:42-47
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10



http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html

This 4th Sunday of Eastertime is traditionally known as Good Shepherd Sunday as we read from the much loved 10th chapter of John's Gospel and hear Jesus play with a whole kaleidoscope of images from his own rural village context: shepherds, sheepfolds, gatekeepers, gates, and then apply them to himself.

There is also as so often in John's gospel, a stark contrast drawn with those who are the opposite of good shepherds – those who are thieves and bandits, who come only to steal, kill and destroy the flock.

All this builds on a long pre-history within the Hebrew Scriptures, where David the Shepherd King spoke in the Psalms (23, 100) of the Lord as Shepherd of God's people, Israel. Later Ezekiel, the prophet of the exile, would accuse the political and religious leaders of so fleecing and exploiting the flock that God himself would take over the role of shepherd (Ezekiel 34). In due course there arose the promise of another great Shepherd King, in the line of David, who would again shepherd God's flock with righteousness and justice (Isaiah 40:11).

Our Gospel begins with Jesus drawing the same contrast between those who are only out for what they can get from the sheep, those who are thieves and sheep-rustlers, and those who are true shepherds of their flock who know and trust their shepherd's voice. Jesus seems to relate the typical way flocks were housed overnight in the Palestinian villages of his time, where perhaps all the small flocks of the village would be put into one fold with a gatekeeper on guard overnight, and then in the morning the shepherds would come and call out their own small flock from the mass, and lead them out to pasture for the day.

We still saw Palestinian shepherds out with their small flocks, often of sheep and goats mixed together, perhaps not too much changed over the millennia, though I noticed that for the most part baseball caps seemed to have replaced Bedouin headgear, and phone ringtones replaced shepherd flutes!

We love that image of the shepherd, but I want to focus a little more today on Jesus' second image, that of being the gate: I am the gate for the sheep.

I found it interesting that when I put the word 'gate' into my search engine, three words that immediately came up were gatekeepers, gated communities and Bill Gates, the Microsoft billionaire! I thought that pretty well sums up our world! We often talk of gatekeepers in an organisation as those who prevent others from taking part or gaining entry or power. Gated communities have very much a focus on keeping safe those who are within, and having locked gates to keep people out, perhaps even with guards anxiously looking over the gates watching out for thieves and bandits.

What sort of gate is Jesus? 'I am the gate for the sheep: whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.' Whoever enters by me will be *saved* or *safe* – the Greek word *sozo* has both those connotations, so Jesus does indeed provide safe entry into the sheepfold, into the community of God's people, a place of sanctuary, refreshment, healing and rest.

But that's not where it ends, for Jesus as the gate is not a one-way entry, it's a gate that swings both ways: the sheep will come in *and go out* and find pasture. The sheep cannot just stay in the fold, safe and secure as it may be; if they do, they'll starve to death. No, rather the shepherd calls them by name, calls them out and leads them out to find fresh pasture, to feed them so they may grow, so they will not just survive but actually thrive, so that 'they will have life and have it abundantly' (10:10).

That is the challenge, isn't it, of following the Shepherd, trusting that the Shepherd knows where the green and verdant pastures grow, knows what food is right for us at the right time, knows when we need moving on to new pastures, new places and new experiences. Yes it may be scarier out there than ensconced in the sheepfold, but it's far more exciting and certainly not boring!

In these weeks of Easter, it's a lovely image to think of Jesus the gate being made of the wood of *the cross*¹. Whoever enters by me will be saved, Jesus says, and he will go on in John 10 to speak of himself five times as the Good Shepherd who *lays down his life* for the sheep (v.11, 15, 17, 18). And when we come to Christ in faith, when we step through the gateway of the cross, we find ourselves free to come and go in the green pastures of God's new world, we have entered into life.

¹ Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections Year A*, London: SPCK, 2004, 65.

As 1 Peter puts it, we are now free from sins to live for righteousness, we are healed and have returned to the shepherd and guardian of our souls (2:24, 25), secure enough now to participate freely and share in the abundant life of Christ.

So, the wooden gate of the cross, and perhaps another Easter image of Jesus the gate is of *the empty tomb*. Through Jesus' resurrection, death is no longer a dead-end street if you like, but rather the open door or gate to fullness of life in God's presence, life in an abundance that we earth-bound creatures can only imagine in the present.

The great Easter icon of the Eastern church shows Jesus pulling up Adam and Eve, representatives of all humanity, through the broken gates of the place of the dead, and back into life.

Jesus' response to Simon Peter's great confession of faith is that the gates of Hades, the place of the dead, will not prevail against the church founded on the rock of Peter and his faith (Mt 16:18).

So the gates of the dead are breached, and in their place is the empty tomb, an open gate, an open.

In the book of Revelation, the risen Christ makes a wonderful promise to the church at Philadelphia (the church whose name means brotherly and sisterly love). "I have the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens: Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut." (Rev. 3: 7,8).

What is the open door that Jesus is inviting you to step through at this time? Is it the door of the wooden cross, the door of the empty tomb, the door to a new pasture? What is the open door that Jesus is inviting us as a community to walk through together? May we pray for listening ears to hear clearly and discern the voice of the Shepherd amidst the many voices around us.

And in these weeks of Eastertime, as we look towards Pentecost, and pray for the coming of the Spirit among us to fill us afresh with the life-giving Spirit of Jesus, I am reminded of a small country church which had a wonderful banner proclaiming "Come Holy Spirit, blow with your life-giving wind". Underneath it, someone had affixed a neatly written little sign, 'Please close the door, because of the draught'. May we have open doors, open minds, open hearts. Amen.