

Reflection for Sunday 25th April 2021
Gospel of John 10; 7-18

What...other sheep as well?

This reading is one of my top 10, and it includes one of the most amazing sentences ever said by Jesus. But I will come back to that in a while.

The reference to a shepherd is not a new one, ever since Psalm 23 it has become one of the loveliest images of the Bible, even when we are not part of a rural community where sheep are a constant. And Psalm 23 has become a sort of favourite readings for so many occasions of life, even by people who would say do not really believe in religion or religious images. And yes, you can guess which Psalm is part of the Lectionary readings for this Sunday!

This reading for today includes two of the seven “I am” statements Jesus pronounced which we find in the Gospel of John: *I am the gate. I am the good shepherd*. And this contrasts a good and a bad shepherd, and a gate that is inclusive as different from a gate that excluding.

Jesus tells us about a gate by which the sheep can go in and come out and find pasture. This is an image of life, as he will say in the closing of verse 10: **I have come so that they may have life and life in all fullness**. And that there is this is one of my top 10 Bible readings.

This is a reading of abundance and generosity - God’s will for creation. This is what we are called to proclaim and share. And yet... behind the scenes we know the bad shepherd lurks in a threatening way, wanting to destroy, to steal, to deprive people from the abundance of life Jesus has spoken about.

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his flock, while the “hired hand” has no form of connection or care for the flock they are called to look after. When danger looms there is one who stays and one who runs, there is one who cares enough to give his life and there is one who runs for his life. There is one who has a personal connection with the flock knowing each by name... and nothing else is said about the other shepherd.

The second reference in this reading that makes is one of my favourites is when Jesus says “*I have other sheep not of this flock. I must bring them in also*” (vs 16). YES, there are other sheep as well. And this is something a number of people I have met over the years find very difficult to accept. For some there seems to be a sense of “exclusivity” – they are part of the ‘only me-only us’ club. A sense that it is not fair if God shares the all-embracing love. It is important to remember that in Jesus’ time, the house of Israel was the centre of the consideration, but Jesus guides us to discover that there were ‘other sheep’ – think of the Samaritan that we call “The Good Samaritan”, of the Canaanite woman we read about in Matthew 15: 21ff, who is called a dog, and she responds about the crumbs that fall under the table, and even horror of horrors, each one of us: we would have been considered Gentiles in Jesus’ time, and yet today we know we are part of the flock. So **YES, there are other sheep around**; let us never forget that!

This reading then is a reminder to us all that God’s people are far and wide, beyond our grasp and understanding. This is a message we can share far and wide because it is generous, it is kind, it is comforting. It does not mean that there will be no dangers – be reminded the passage does speak of

wolves that hunt the flock. But as there are wolves there is also a shepherd, one that cares enough to give his life.

The flock we belong to, is not the end of all flocks... and this is something that challenges us; we are not the centre of the universe. How then will we relate to those who are not of the same flock we belong to? How will we love them? How will we reach them?

We are at this 'special time' when we are revising how we are to be church: how will we live our faith in the times ahead as restriction open up and we go out into the wider world? Who will we meet, that we do not know? What will we say that we have not said before? How will we show compassion and love and respect to others? What will we say to those who have suffered and continue to suffer illness, loneliness, fear? How will we stretch out our arms to embrace those who have experienced abandonment or rejection? How will we break down the barriers that have divided people into "them" and "us"? How will the generosity of God's never-ending love - that life in abundance for all, become the hallmark of our existence?

One of the challenges before us as churches, is to consider our installations, our activities, our sharing as a sign of God's blessing to the surrounding community. Is this one of the things we can consider for the way forward? I am sure other challenges will emerge on the journey ahead, and in considering each and every one of them we have to humbly and honestly affirm God is central in all we do, we say, and we think. The generous and loving God who has other sheep in the flock.

The love of Christ invites us to listen for Jesus' voice as it is heard by our sisters and brothers who are not in our flock.

Let me close with Malcolm Guite's version of Psalm 23¹

*To suffer my own dereliction for me,
To be my shepherd, and to lead me through
The grave and the gate of death, in strength and mercy*

*Christ has come down. At last I've found the true
Shepherd and the false just fade away
Before him. I will sing of how he drew*

*Me from the snares I set myself, how day
Dawned on my darkness, how he brought me forth,
Converted me and open up the way*

*For me, and led me gently on the path,
Led me beside still waters, promised me
That he'd be with me all my days on earth,*

*And when my last day comes, accompany
And comfort me, as evening shadows fall,
And draw me into his eternity.*

¹ Malcom Guite – David's Crown – sounding the Psalms, Canterbury Press, 2021