



Acts 2 42-47 Psalm 23 1 Peter 2 1-10 John 10 1-10

Easter 4: Shepherds and gate keepers

© Collect of the Day

Good shepherd of the sheep,
by whom the lost are sought
and guided into the fold;
feed us and we shall be satisfied,
heal us and we shall be whole,
and lead us that we may be with you,
with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
where you reign one God for ever.

Amen – A New Zealand Prayer Book

Though brief, today's Gospel reading is dense, swarming with so many ideas and images that it can seem baffling. There are many different figures of speech, seemingly muddled up too: The shepherd becomes the gate and the gatekeeper disappears, while thieves and bandits pass out of sight and strangers appear. If we try to approach it logically, we can be frustrated, so an intuitive *Lectio Divina* styled approach might be more helpful: After quiet reading and reflection, what is it that catches your attention?

It was the dominant image of the passage that drew me: Shepherds.

In Christ's day, they were at the bottom of the Palestinian social ladder, sharing the same unenviable status as tax collectors and dung sweepers. However, it wasn't always so, and Scripture therefore gives us contradictory messages, depending what you read.

During the time of the Patriarchs, shepherding was a noble occupation and in nomadic societies, everyone lived in tents and raised livestock, so everyone, no matter their social standing, was a shepherd.

With social development, nomadic herding gave way to settled agriculture and shepherding ceased to hold its prominent position,

becoming a menial vocation for the labouring class. Around 1000 BC King David was a brief blip of improved social image on the otherwise negative radar. The lowliness of this occupation made David's promotion all the more striking (2 Samuel 7:8). While poetic sections of Scripture record positive allusions to shepherding, scholars believe these references reflect a literary ideal, not a social reality. So bad was the reputation of shepherds, that German Lutheran theologian, Dr Joachim Jeremias says shepherds were despised, second-class citizens, untrustworthy and in Jerusalem in the time of Jesus: "The rabbis ask with amazement how, in view of the despicable nature of shepherds, one can explain why God was called 'my shepherd' in Psalm 23:1."

Into this social context of religious snobbery and class prejudice, came Jesus, provocative from first to last. At the start, it was lowly, unpretentious shepherds who heard the joyous news of his birth, and now in the passage today, Jesus challenges the prejudices of the Jews, mixes his metaphors and issues a stinging rebuke to self-serving leaders.

Paradoxically, though actual shepherds were scorned, in Mediterranean culture, "a good shepherd" was an honourable way to describe a "a good leader" (Ewart). So in using the imagery of the real work and responsibility of a shepherd, Jesus paints a picture of himself and his own role.

As he describes, the sheep followed their shepherd out of the fold each morning to graze. With staff, crook and perhaps a slingshot, shepherds protected and took care of their flock while they were out grazing. The dangers were real and many: Injury, predators, separation from the mob, even sheep rustlers. At night, he led them back into the safety of the fold, whether in a cave, stone-walled pen or enclosure fashioned of thorny branches.

George Adam Smith, the 19th century biblical scholar tells of travelling in the Holy Land and coming across a shepherd and his sheep. In the conversation that followed, the man showed him the fold into which the sheep were led at night: Four walls, with an entrance. Smith asked him: "This is where they go at night?" "Yes," said the shepherd, "and when they are in there, they are perfectly safe." "But there is no door," said Smith. "I am the door," said the shepherd. He was not a Christian man and wasn't speaking in the language of the New Testament but speaking as an Arab shepherd. Smith looked at him and asked: "What do you

mean you are the door?" "When the light has gone," said the shepherd, "and all the sheep are inside, I lie in that open space, and no sheep ever goes out but across my body, and no wolf comes in unless he crosses my body; I am the door." (sermons.com). Hence Jesus refers to himself as the gate, just like real shepherds were for their sheep.

Often the sheep of more than one shepherd would be enclosed in the same pen at night, but each shepherd named his sheep and could identify them, and they, him. In the morning, when it was time to take the sheep out to graze, each shepherd would call his sheep by name out of the combined flock and they would follow only him.

A story is told of how, during World War I, some soldiers tried to steal a flock of sheep from a hillside near Jerusalem. The sleeping shepherd awoke to find his flock being driven off. He couldn't recapture them by force, so he called out to them with his distinctive call. The sheep listened and returned to their rightful owner. The soldiers couldn't stop the sheep from responding to their shepherd's voice. (Guzik)

This detail suggests an important element of the image as Jesus used it: Shepherding is not just an action, it is also a relationship. The relationship between shepherd and sheep, between God and people, is more than just a recognition, in the work of John, "know his voice" implies a deep bond, attachment and connection (Ewart).

The obvious answer to the question "Who is the shepherd?" is, of course, Jesus, who states: "I am the good shepherd" (John 10: 11). The role of shepherd could be described as enhancing, nourishing, fostering, empowering and guarding life, leading another to "abundant life". It doesn't only have to be God who plays that role. Others may have too.

Who has played that role for and had that relationship with us at different times in our lives?

And then, what about us, you and me? Could we do those things for others? Could we be – or perhaps are we – a shepherd to others, enhancing their life and helping abundance to flourish?

For reflection, I suggest we consider the questions:

- "Who are the people who have shepherded, guided, nurtured, and protected my life?"

- “When have I shepherded/do I shepherd the life of another?”

In conclusion, a thought about a possible parallel between the text and our current situation. Coming from a crime-wracked society, where we survived a home invasion on Christmas Eve one year, the mention of the “thief and bandit” has very particular associations. Many commentators note the difference in the *modus operandi* of these two types of criminals: Thieves are stealthy and sneaky, while bandits are overt, overwhelming and don’t try to hide. The effect is the same: Negative. They steal, destroy and cause harm. They deplete the abundance of our life.

For many, COVID-19, may feel a bit like a thief or a bandit and the virus and its attendant consequences are having the same effect: Depleting the abundance of life. Just as we take preventive measures to guard against criminals, perhaps thinking differently about the virus and drawing this parallel might be helpful?

References

David Ewart, www.holytextures.com; seasons of the spirit online; enduringword.com: David Guzik; www.sermons.com; *Shepherd Status*, Randy Alcorn, in *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus*, Nancy Guthrie, Editor, 2008

It’s Familiar... - Maren C. Tirabassi

When the community is a shepherd, then no one will want.
Imagine everyone having
a safe place to lie down,
water to drink,
education to restore the soul,
and a meaningful path
of work or retirement –
for God’s sake,
God’s sacred.

There are many dark valleys
of illness, loss, depression,
addiction or fear,
but when there are companions –
with a walking stick of guidance
and a staff of assistance –
then there is comfort.

Imagine the community's table set
with the kind of generosity
that changes enemy into friend,
the greatest honour anointing a stranger
and every empty cup
of the most vulnerable overflowing.

Surely, then our breaking bread
and all our prayers
will mean something,
and our neighbours' goodwill follow.
No one will worry as much about
personal God's-house-dwelling,
as the community's hospitality to others –
Day by day by day by day
and all our lives long.