## “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly’

The image of Jesus as a gate has not captured the imagination as much as others have for some obvious, some artistic reasons. In John’s Gospel, Jesus promises to be for us a door or gate. As an image, it does not have the same allure as say the vine (the new Israel) or the emotional appeal of the Good Shepherd (the nurturing protector).

However, in past centuries it would have been different. To Greek readers of this Gospel, Jesus referring to himself as a door would have resonated with their understanding, found in the literature of Homer onward, that a heaven above the earth was entered through such a gate.

We can also find references in Jewish scriptures such as in Psalm 118:

‘Open to me the gates of righteousness,

That I may enter through them

And give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord;

The righteous shall enter through it.’

Many of us feel as though we are living on the threshold of faith, tentative about commitment because we are too full of questions or unease about what we may be getting ourselves into.

In this passage, Jesus implies that, far from being a constricting route to a place where we have to surrender our integrity, to follow him means to ‘come in and go out and find pasture’ (v9).

In the bible, the picture of the shepherd with his sheep is frequently used to refer to the king and his people. In our world we tend not to think of our rulers and leaders in the same way. We think of the directors and MDs of big international companies directing operations in a seemingly remote way and unlikely to know or recognise the names and faces of those employed by them.

In the Bible the ideal king is pictured as a shepherd (Ezekiel 34) perhaps modelled on the shepherd boy David who became the king after God’s own heart. In a world where they knew about the intimate contact and trust between the shepherd and sheep, this was their preferred way of talking about kingship.

This is the image Jesus chooses to explain his own claim to be the true king of Israel. In the first five verses of this passage Jesus doesn’t mention himself directly but instead talks in abstract terms about the difference between true and false shepherds.

At this point it’s worth reminding you of the difference in shepherding styles between what we know as shepherding and that employed in Jesus’ time in the Middle East and continuing today. In the Middle East the shepherd will go into a crowded sheepfold and call out his own sheep, one by one, naming them. They will recognise his voice and come to him. The fact that he recognises them and knows their individual characteristics, markings, likes and dislikes is not surprising because of the hours and hours he spends with them each day. And it’s not a one-way relationship because the sheep will recognise him and know his voice. Someone else can come into the sheepfold calling their names but they wont approach him as they don’t recognise his voice and they are listening for the one voice they know and trust, the one that matters. When they hear him, he won’t need a sheepdog to keep them in order. He won’t be behind them driving them on but instead striding ahead calling their names and they will follow him.

And so, Jesus chooses to explain his own claim to be the true King of Israel. But what is Jesus telling us about the difference between the good shepherd and the false ones – the thieves and brigands. And who are they, these strangers? Jesus is posing the question: how will you tell God’s true, appointed king when he comes?

The answer that Jesus is giving us is that you can tell the true king the same way you can tell the true shepherd. Anybody can turn up in Jerusalem and give himself airs as a leader. But only the one who comes by the way God has appointed has the right to do so. Anyone can call followers. But the sign of the real king is the response that comes from the heart, when people hear his voice and, in love and trust, follow him. Perhaps because Jesus was finding puzzled faces before him after this parable, he goes on to highlight the other part of the shepherd’s role. He is the gate. In many Eastern sheepfolds, the shepherd lies down at night in the gateway, to stop the sheep escaping and to stop predators from getting in. Here, Jesus seems to be indicating the way in which the shepherd keeps the sheep safe and, like God himself in Psalm 121.8, watches over their going out and their coming in. The emphasis is on the safety and fulfilled life of the sheep and its all about keeping the sheep safe, not minding his own interests; his priority is the sheep.

However strange the sheep minding method may be, the promise of full life, full to overflowing is as relevant today as it was in Jesus’ time.

Jesus has come to bring life and more abundant life but we need to know what that looks like and how to live it. Perhaps “in all its fullness” is more comprehensible than abundant.

What drives many of us and most of the time is a desire to possess which is generally achieved through status in employment leading to wealth. But, unfortunately, possessing can make us anxious. “What if I lose it all”. It can even become an end in itself. The love of “stuff” can lead to addiction, debt, even murder. A stuff-filled life cannot be what Jesus means by “life in all its fullness”. In our Acts reading we hear of the early believers’ pooling all their resources, their possessions, their stuff and distributing the proceeds amongst the needy. Their generous actions gave them the goodwill of all the people and attracted more and more to join them.

And yet, 2000 years on and Luke’s ideal has yet to be fully realised in the company of God’s pilgrim people. And, in reality, how many of us would or could truly welcome it.

We cling on to any fragment of stuff we can, to reassure ourselves that we exist, that we matter. As long as property and status are our way of evaluating ourselves and seeking affirmation from others, we shall go on cutting ourselves off from “life in all its fullness”.

It probably takes heroic sacrifice to secure our freedom from the lure of stuff. That Christians can be really good at: “all the vain things that charm me most I sacrifice them to his blood”. In 1 Peter, its is shown that Christ’s sacrifice is to be a model for us – not by means of self-starvation or self-flagellation or self-hatred. We have been freed from sin for a simple purpose: to live a life of righteousness.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus promises to be for us a door. The door opens to let us out of prison and into light and freedom. The door closes to keep us safe from harm, from that roaring lion who “walketh about seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5.8). Far from being a constricting route to a place where we have to surrender our integrity, to follow him means to “come in and go out and find pasture’ (v9). He opens up the way to a place of safety and rest, a sheepfold, where in all our confused hustle and bustle, it is the presence of the shepherd that reassures and makes life worthy of our trust.

The message of all three of our readings is a message about who we are called to be. What we learn from them is that stuff cannot protect us. Christ on the other hand does both. The call today to Jesus’ true sheep is to listen for his voice and to find in him and him alone the life which is overflowing, life indeed. He has not come to close down the complexity of living but to enrich it and make it abundant. To give us life in abundance, life in all its fullness.

Amen