

Sunday 30 April 2023
Holy Trinity – Holy Communion (8.00am)
Easter 4

Acts 2:42-47

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

It's unlikely that many young people today would choose "shepherd" as a career path. In fact, it's unlikely that many of us have even seen a shepherd, except perhaps in a picture or on television. It's not a common profession in our culture, but in Jesus' day the work of the shepherd was well known.

Jesus often compared spiritual principles to things found in the everyday life of his contemporaries. In this teaching from our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus uses the imagery of a shepherd to help us better understand how he relates to his followers.

The first image is that of a shepherd going and coming through a door to the sheepfold. The second is that of sheep coming and going through that door.

What we have here is a parable. So, picture a group of sheep. They're safe in their pen, which they know well, and they are keeping an eye on the only way in and out - the gate.

A variety of people have been coming to that gate, and the sheep are a little wary. They like it when the shepherd comes. They know the shepherd, and he knows each one of them. He takes them out to places where they can get good pasture to feed on safely. When he comes to the gate, they can abandon their watchfulness, just get on with their eating and trust that he will take care of them.

When other people come to the gate it is completely different. The sheep are in a quandary, they remember that without the shepherd it has usually gone very wrong. Some of the sheep are recommending that they don't go out of the gate at all. That way, they know they will all be safe. But then the other sheep point out that they will also starve to death if they don't go out to pasture.

Poor bewildered sheep!

We are more likely to understand what's going on here if we understand that, in the Bible, the picture of a shepherd with his sheep is frequently used to refer to the king and his people. In our modern world we don't tend to think of leaders and rulers in quite that sort of way. We think of people running big companies, of the presidents of banks and transnational companies. We think of people sitting behind desks, dictating letters or chairing meetings.

Often such people are quite remote from those who work in their organisations. They seldom see them face to face, and probably don't know the names of very many.

But in the Bible the ideal king is pictured as a shepherd (read Ezekiel 34). In a world where they knew about the intimate contact and trust between shepherd and sheep, this was their preferred way of talking about kingship. This is just

the image that Jesus chooses to explain his own claim to be the true king of Israel. Here we hear him talking in abstract terms about the difference between true shepherds and false ones. Jesus is posing the question, not just back then, but to us also today: how will you tell God's true, appointed king when he comes?

The answer is that you can tell the true king the same way you can tell the true shepherd. 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.

I said earlier that this parable had two images.

The first five verses set out the first image, that of the shepherd. This is Jesus saying... this is what I am doing; this is what gives substance to my claim to be sent by God as Israel's true king. The fact that people are hearing me and following me proves that God has sent me.

But, then faced with blank stares from his audience, Jesus has to continue with the second image. He is the gate or door. In the Middle East it was common for the shepherd to lie down at night in the gateway to the sheepfold.

This was to stop the sheep getting out and to stop predators getting in.

The emphasis is on the safety, and the fulfilled life, of the sheep.

The shepherd has no business in looking after his own interests.

His priority is the sheep. Find a king like that and you've found your Messiah and Saviour.

The promise of full life, full to overflowing, is as relevant for us today as it was then. The modern Western world has discovered how unsatisfying materialism really is, and is looking for something more, looking for something beyond.

Jesus was calling his hearers back then, and indeed is calling us today, calling his true sheep, calling them to listen for his voice, and to find in him, and in him alone, the life which is overflowing life indeed.

Amen.