

There are times when our set readings for a Sunday, I believe, sell us short, and today is one of those occasions. The reading from John's gospel, as laid down in the lectionary, starts at chapter 10, verse 11. "I am the Good Shepherd." What follows is a delightfully reassuring reading about how Jesus cares us, his flock, but what is missing is the real explanation for why describing himself as a shepherd is such a good metaphor. So, I asked for our reading to start not at verse 11, but verse 1 of chapter 10, so we got the whole story. And I think this piece of writing, this telling of what Jesus had been saying to the pharisees, becomes complete. To the Pharisee? Indeed yes.

What had just happened is that Jesus had healed a man who was born blind, and there followed a great debate about whose sin had caused this man to be born blind with the disciples, but then the Pharisees got involved as the healing of this man had taken place on the Sabbath. And everyone seemed to get involved, and the man's parents were quizzed by the Pharisees and actually tried really hard to not get themselves into all sorts of trouble, as when the Pharisees interrogated them they said, "Ask him yourself – he is of age" to the question, "Who healed your son?" And then we got this whole passage about the Shepherd, and why none of that conversation about sin causing ill health, or healing on the sabbath mattered. Jesus mission was much more fundamental.

Out of all that discussion Jesus not only said that he was the Good Shepherd, but he explained what he meant by that.

So, not for the first time, and probably not for the last, I find myself preaching on the subject of sheep! A few things about sheep.

First, I may be wrong; I may be doing a huge injustice to sheep, but they never come across as the brightest of animals do they. Sometimes they just seem to follow you, at a distance admittedly, or they run away in any direction, or they follow their friends who probably also don't know whether they are going – but whatever they do, it never feels well thought out.

Second, they are really quite defenceless creatures – they are entirely dependent on their shepherds for protection. They run around with numerous jumpers on, but if anything attacks them they have no means of fighting back.

Third, they are afraid of running water. Give them a nice motionless pool of water and they will drink, but if its moving then they are out of there.

Finally, I don't know if you had noticed, but they are a bit smelly. Apparently they secrete an oil that soaks into their wool and that tends to mean that everything sticks to them, and their wool can get really matted – I'm sure you have seen.

And Jesus is comparing us to sheep. That's a bit harsh isn't it?

Perhaps, but hopefully that is not really his intention.

Before we get the I am the Good Shepherd line, we get another I am statement which you may have noticed. "I am the gate for the sheep." What's that all about.

A shepherd in Jesus' day had one responsibility and one responsibility only – to look after the sheep. He would take the sheep up onto the hillside and stay with them. At night, when danger against the sheep from other animals was at its greatest the shepherd would build a sheepfold. It might have been out of rocks, it might have been using a cave, it might be made of branches, topped if he could find some, by thorns to deter the predator, but the walls would be as high as he could make them. And there would be just one way in or out – a single entrance – it was not possible for sheep or predators to climb the walls of the fold – the only way in was through the single entrance. And the shepherd would lie across that entrance all night to stop predators getting in or sheep getting out.

Sometimes two or more shepherds would share a fold – with all the sheep in together, and the shepherds taking in turn to be the gate.

But then, at the end of the night, how would they divide the sheep again? Simply because the sheep knew their shepherds voice and when their shepherd called they followed. The sheep followed the shepherd – none of this prodding and encouraging from behind – the shepherd led the way and the sheep followed.

Kate and I were up on the North Yorkshire Moors last week, and at one point we met two farmers, perhaps shepherds (?), coming the other way, driving two sheep. When the sheep saw us they bolted up the hill and one of the shepherds had to chase after them and bring them back – but the shepherd was chasing, not calling.

So I wonder if that background helps us to understand some of the things that Jesus says as he appears to switch between metaphors and reality. That first verse.

"Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. "

So what is representing what in our metaphor laden sheep world. The sheep are you and me, the followers of God. The pen is the Kingdom of God. The gatekeeper is the shepherd, is Jesus himself. And what Jesus is saying here is that to enter the sheep pen you must go through the gate which means you need to go via the shepherd. Or, to put it another way, the only way into the Kingdom of God is via Jesus.

And what about

“The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”

Jesus is more than willing to let people into the Kingdom of God, and people who follow him listen out for him. But note – he calls we follow. There are no, he pushes, we go where he wants us to, where he calls us to.

“But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.”

What is more, as good followers of God we will not follow the call of people who want us to go in the opposite direction to which Jesus is calling us.

And then we get another classic line from the bible:

“Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.”

And the Pharisees missed the point completely. And I think this is an interesting point about Jesus’ teaching. It is quite difficult for us to pick up the bible and read it, and understand it straight away. After all, the disciples frequently misunderstood, or just didn’t understand at all, what Jesus was saying to them. And now the Pharisees are not understanding. Frequently we need the help of others to understand what the bible means. That is why it is good when you read your bible to have bible reading notes by your side to help you understand the passage you have just read. And I really can’t encourage that enough. I’m hoping to pull together a range of bible reading notes for people to look at, so if you might be interested in that do let me know.

We then have 4 verses which pretty much repeat what Jesus has already said – I rather suspect because he knew the Pharisees hadn’t understood. And then we get, well, the headline verse really:

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

We then get some warnings about the failing of hired hands, and then Jesus repeats himself.

“I am the good shepherd;” but then he says, “I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

Don't you find it encouraging that Jesus says that he knows his sheep? Jesus knows each and every one of us, and not just a little, but completely. Are we not told that every hair of our head is numbered, as a way of showing how well we are known by God? But how well do we know Jesus? Clearly it is important that we get to know as much as we can about Him – with the aim of knowing Jesus as well as Jesus knows God and God knows Jesus – and that is quite a challenge as God and Jesus know each other completely. Reading our bibles will help but we must always remember that we must try and know him more tomorrow than we do today.

Of course in this Easter season, the phrase, “and I lay down my life for the sheep” could not be more pertinent.

We then get a sentence about he has other sheep that do not belong to this fold. There are two different meanings that can be applied to this line. First, this was Jesus again saying that in the world that he was living in, there were the Jewish people, God's chosen people, who would clearly have seen themselves as God's sheep, but perhaps not Jesus' sheep, and then there were the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people, who at that time, as Jesus had not really preached to them in any significant way yet, would definitely not see themselves as Jesus' sheep and mostly not God's sheep, but Jesus is saying that they are his sheep, but at this time they do not belong in the fold.

But the second meaning is much more on an individual level, and to me, this is the section where we can start applying this sheep / shepherd / sheepfold metaphor to our church. No, it's not as simple as the church is the sheepfold, you are the sheep and I am the shepherd, although perhaps that is a useful starting point.

There is something very challenging to me as a priest about a passage like this, but I do think what is interesting looking at the origin's of our English text, is that the Greek word for shepherd and the Greek word for pastor is the same word. So perhaps what this is saying to me is that our church leaders, and I don't just mean me but I mean anyone who has any sort of role in leading our churches, should be seeing themselves as pastors – and certainly not as those hired hands that Jesus talked about, those people who really didn't care for the sheep in the way that the sheep should be cared for.

You see the shepherds or pastors in the story care for the sheep, whoever they are – and that is where the reference to sheep not being in the fold comes in – and it is our job to try and point those sheep not in the fold in the right direction.

I very much see the church as a doorway to the sheepfold – the sheepfold, remember, representing the Kingdom of God. It is our job to guide people into the sheepfold, whoever they are, whatever age they are, we should be doing all we can to make those sheep feel welcome.

This Sunday is Vocation Sunday. Most people will see that as a Sunday when people feel some form of calling to either ordained ministry or licensed lay ministry, but what this reading about the Good

Shepherd tells me is that we should all together be considering what our vocation as a church is. I would suggest that is something that we need to consider.

How can we meet the needs of our villagers better? What is there that we should be doing that we are not, and what is there that we are doing, but could do better. This is the journey that all churches need to go on from time to time – it is all too easy to carry on doing the same thing, in the same way, week in week out, whereas perhaps we should be doing things differently.

What those things are is something that we can only find out by talking to the shepherd. So let us each make that a priority over the coming weeks. At the end of May we have our Annual Church Meeting, and perhaps at that meeting there may be something that you feel able to offer.

There is currently no list of what is needed, but there is a need for new ideas, so that we can take our churches, our sheepfolds, forward, so that they are ready to welcome sheep through them, into the Kingdom of God.

Amen.