

St Mary's Concord

A Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

The readings for the Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year A): Acts 2:14, 36-41; 1 Peter 2:20-25; John 10:1-10. In John's Gospel Jesus describes himself not only as the Good Shepherd but also as the gate to the sheepfold.

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic all churches remain closed. If you have not already done so, please take a few minutes to read John 10:1-10.

"Fake News" has become one of the catch-cries of recent years as various political leaders claim that stories appearing in the media are deliberate attempts to give a false or biased version of the truth. So how do we determine what is accurate and what is "fake" news?

We can find ourselves being bombarded by media gurus who want to tell us what we should think or what we should do. Some are so obviously biased that it is easy to take what they say with the proverbial "grain of salt". At other times it is more difficult to sift the facts from the opinions.

In the age of the Internet we can put a question into Google and be presented with hundreds if not thousands of possible websites. Which ones do we trust? We have our values that we live by but how do we find our way through the maze?

When Jesus describes himself as the gate of the sheepfold, he is using that image as a metaphor to describe his own role. The image was familiar to those who lived in Palestine. The nomadic shepherds allowed their sheep to graze freely but at night to protect the flock they gathered the sheep in a pen.

Whether a permanent structure or a temporary barrier made of thorn bush, the pen was only secure if someone guarded the entrance. In the morning, the shepherd stood at the gate and called his sheep. But why does Jesus call himself the gate?

To understand the image, we need to know that in the Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament) God is described as the shepherd and the people of Israel as the flock. One of the most familiar psalms (Ps 23) begins with the words "The Lord is my shepherd".

We also need to recall the context in John's gospel. Immediately before this scene we have the story of the healing of a man who was born blind (John 9:1-41). We heard it on the fourth Sunday of Lent. That scene concluded with a confrontation between Jesus and some pharisees.

They were religious leaders who interpreted the Law of Moses and Jesus had condemned them. He declared that they were false leaders who were not only unable to see how God was at work among them but also kept the ordinary people from seeing the truth.

Against that background we begin to understand that Jesus is talking about leadership. The world around us gives us many different models of leadership: political leaders, community leaders, leaders in sport or business.

At one extreme are the dictators or tyrants who seek to impose their views on others. At the other extreme are the leaders who seem to change their position with every new opinion poll so that no one knows what they believe. When there is a lack of leadership, people become frustrated and often turn to those who appear to have an answer, whether true or fake.



In a crisis we look for leaders with a vision. We want someone who can help us to understand what is happening and can restore public confidence. But leaders need to win that confidence. We like strong leaders but we do not like being told what to do. We look for leaders who can take us with them on the journey.

In John's gospel Jesus gives us an insight into an essential quality of leadership. Leadership is about service and anyone in a Christian community who is entrusted with leadership must be a true shepherd. But who determines who is a true shepherd? The image suggests that it is Jesus who calls the shepherds because he is the gatekeeper. But John's gospel offers another insight.

The contrast is drawn between the true shepherd and the "stranger". The difference is that the sheep know the voice of the shepherd and follow him. But why do they know his voice?

The key to understanding the metaphor of the gate is the relationship between the sheep and the shepherd. It is a relationship of trust that is founded on a lived experience of care and service.

That may seem obvious if we are talking about a Christian community, but it applies to all communities and especially to families. In times of hardship and crisis whose voice do we recognise? The answer is not the ones who are loudest but the ones we trust because we know they want what is best for us.

In the journey of the Christian life we hear many voices. Which ones do we follow? The gatekeeper reminds us that we will only recognise the voice of the Good Shepherd, if we have a relationship with him.

Next Sunday we continue to read John's gospel (Jn 14:1-12) and we will hear where that relationship is leading us.

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