

19th March 2023, 4th Sunday of Lent, 'Let your light shine' – John 10:1-16 'Life'

Like many of you, Alise and I enjoy watching wildlife programmes. The quality of the camera work is usually stunning nowadays, and we learn so much about our amazing natural world. One of the things I found most amazing recently was watching a huge colony of penguins during nesting and mating season. Despite being away for weeks at a time feeding in the ocean, and coming back to tens of thousands of birds, penguins always managed to find their mate. And we now know that, along with crows, penguins can recognise not just faces but voices. So, even if hundreds or thousands of other birds are calling, a penguin can distinguish voices and find their mate and young. I find that amazing!

As humans we also learn this skill early. By a month old a baby can recognise its parents' voice, even if the parent is in the other room. And, as Jesus reminds us today, sheep also recognise their shepherds' voice. They don't listen to a stranger – but when their shepherd calls, they come running.

'My sheep know my voice,' says Jesus just after today's passage in John chapter 10 – and as we continue our Lent series 'Let your light shine', I think we can say that what Lent is really about, in essence, is learning to hear and know Jesus' voice again in our lives. **The time we invest in whatever spiritual practices we adopt for Lent is about knowing Jesus' voice better** – because the better we know it, the more we can follow it. Just like us, sheep only follow voices they know.

This is a famous passage, but we don't always appreciate its full richness, because modern-day farming is often quite different to the life of a shepherd in first century Israel. So today is going to be a bit of an agricultural history lesson – but I hope you'll find that it's worth it!

Let's start with the sheepfold, which we encounter at the start of our passage in v1: this is not a covered barn, but more like a fortified pen. It would be built with loose stones piled to form a rough, walled enclosure – just high enough to keep the sheep *in* and wild animals *out*. There was no gate as such, but the shepherd himself (or a colleague) would literally be the gate. They would sit in the gap and protect the sheep directly. No dogs or locked metal gates – just one brave shepherd. This is why Jesus calls himself both the Gate and the Good Shepherd: in first century Israel, that was two ways of saying the same thing.

And it means two amazing things for us today: **first, that Jesus is the way to life**. If you want to be part of God's kingdom, Jesus is the gate, the one who lets you in, and welcomes you into God's family, just as he says in v9: 'I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.' But it's not a restrictive type of arrangement, quite the reverse, it brings freedom and flourishing: 'They will come in and go out and find pasture.' What a lovely picture that is!

Second, it also means Jesus looks after us. There were many threats to the flock, but the shepherd protects them directly. He doesn't run away when he sees a wolf coming, but stands his ground, for the sake of his flock – as Jesus says in v11: 'The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.' We know what that meant for Jesus, even if his hearers didn't then – and it only increases the power of that image.

So that's home life in the flock – what about day-to-day living and grazing? Well, much of Israel is tough, semi-arid hill country – the really lush pasture, then as now, is reserved for growing crops, so sheep travelled over a wide area to find food, led by their shepherd.

Jesus refers to this specifically in v3: 'He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.' The sheep then follow wherever the shepherd leads: they don't stay in one field grazing all day, but wander widely over the land, looking for food and water, just as Jesus continues in v4: 'When the shepherd has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.'

This is a journey for our day-to-day lives, and everything included in that. It reminds us that **the third thing we learn about Jesus the Good Shepherd is that he guides us**. Not in a general sort of way, but directly. I fear that too many people mistakenly think of God like a shepherd who lets his sheep into the field in the morning and leaves them alone till dusk. But that's not the kind of shepherd Jesus knew, or was talking about. Instead, this shepherd, the Good Shepherd, is involved with us throughout our lives. He leads us – and our job is to follow him.

It's lovely to think of Jesus as a companion to walk alongside us, and that's right: but **in Lent we also remind ourselves that we are called to follow Jesus as a leader. We discern his voice and try to follow where he's calling us**. In ancient Israel, the shepherd (and sheep) often had to work hard to find the really good pasture land, or sources of water. That's much more like the spiritual life, as we know it, isn't it? Nothing that's really worthwhile ever really comes easily, does it? We need our Good Shepherd to lead us to pasture, and to trust him if that pasture takes a while to find.

Finally, all of this leads to one more observation: **to follow Jesus the Good Shepherd is really all about abundant life, life in all its fullness**. As I've observed before, the Greek language had two different words for 'life' – *bios* and *zoe*. 'Bios' means physical existence – simply being alive, breathing. 'Zoe' is real life – spiritual life, wellbeing, wholeness. This is the word Jesus uses here when he says that his purpose for us is abundant life – abundant *zoe*.

And as humans, **we are wired for this kind of zoe life**. It's built into our DNA, because we are made in God's image, so therefore we long for the same things God already has within himself. Even those who would not profess our faith long for deep relationship, strong community, fruitful lives and to rejoice in the beauty of our world. And Jesus is calling them too, as our passage finishes: 'I have other sheep who are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also.' He wants a global flock, all of whom can enjoy his abundant life. The Good Shepherd offers all of us the way to this kind of life: a life of protection, provision and freedom, if only we will trust the Shepherd and follow his voice.

So today, let's give thanks for our Good Shepherd. Let's acknowledge our need for him, let's invite him to lead us again, and above all let's recommit ourselves to knowing his voice. And let's do that confident of this great truth: that his plan for us is true life, zoe life, life in all its fullness. Amen.