

Sermon for Sunday 11 May 2014
St Paul's Ipswich
Easter 4

Have you ever thought to yourself, "Where did that come from?" I don't mean suddenly finding something that you didn't realize was there or even the pleasantly surprised, "Oh, where this that come from?" that many mothers would have expressed this morning. I mean when you are listening to someone and they say something totally unexpected. You begin to wonder what lies behind the statement. What has given rise to those words, what is the back-story here? Where did that come from?

That was my reaction to this morning's gospel reading.

When I look at a passage from the gospels my first question is usually, "What is Jesus saying in this passage?" or "What is the writer of this gospel trying to say in sharing this story, why did he pick this event or this dialogue to share with us?" after all, we are told that there were many other things that Jesus said and did that are not recorded. But for this morning I had to ask my what the compilers of the lectionary gave us this reading in the middle of the Easter season? I was expecting, as you may have been, another resurrection appearance in the same way that we have been hearing them over the past weeks. But today we step back through John's gospel all the way to chapter 10 and pick out a passage about the shepherds and the sheep entering thought the gate.

Where did that come from? Why did you pick this reading for us today.

If he wanted reference to caring for sheep, there is the account of Jesus having breakfast on the shore of the lake with the fisherman after his resurrection. There he says to Peter, "feed my sheep". But no, we are only half way through the easter season and already we have left behind the resurrection appearances, no more to come, all done.

The fact is that in the Revised Common Lectionary, the fourth Sunday after Easter is Good Shepherd Sunday. This happens every year, although in our case, in year A, the actual description of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is not until the verse after our gospel reading ends, but I digress. We could just say that well, the compilers of the lectionary put this gospel in this week because it's Good Shepherd Sunday but I think it's more than that. Good Shepherd Sunday belongs in the middle of the Easter season because it says something about our relationship with the risen Lord.

This passage actually begins back at the beginning of Chapter 9 and goes all the way through Chapter 10. We actually heard the beginning of this passage back on the fourth Sunday of Lent and now a month and a half later we are hearing the next installment. Let me remind you how this started. Jesus came across a man born blind. After some discussion about whose sin caused the man to be blind, Jesus made some mud, placed it on the man's eyes and sent him to wash in the pool of Shiloam. Next thing you know the authorities are grilling the man about

how and by whom he was healed and he ends up being expelled from the synagogue because they don't like the answers.

Jesus then tells this story of shepherds, sheep, thieves, bandits, gatekeepers strangers, and yes, even the gate, stealth entrance into sheepfolds, knowing the voice of another, being someone's own, and having your name called. And then comes one of those statements that John uses to define who this Jesus is. "I AM the gate". Jesus is the one through whom we enter in fold. It is through him that we are led out to pasture. With him we are safe.

Poor old sheep. They don't have the best of reputations. Not the brightest of God's creatures. I've spent enough time observing the behavior of sheep to vouch for that. If we describe people as sheep we suggest that they blindly follow where ever they are led, not knowing where they are going, just happily following. There's the lost sheep who just wandered off not knowing where and needed to be rescued, then there's the black sheep, the odd one out, the misfit, the ne'er do well, the trouble maker. It has been suggested that sheep in general are not very powerful, hence unable to defend themselves effectively. Also, they are not very good at recognizing localities, which explains why they can so easily go astray.

So the question: Who is it that the gospel writer, or in fact, Jesus is talking about when he refers to the sheep. That's right, it's us. We are the sheep, not too bright, easily lost, not recognizing that where we are when we are hopelessly lost. It's a bit of a sobering thought. But we do have one redeeming feature. We recognize the call of the shepherd when we hear it, or at least I hope we do.

Well that's the sheep but what about the other characters, the thieves, bandits, gatekeepers strangers, and yes, even the gate. If we remember back to the beginning of the passage to the man born blind you will remember that he was questioned by the leaders of the synagogue who eventually threw him out of the synagogue when the questions he asked them showed them up.

One commentator¹ suggests that these thieves and bandits are the misguided synagogue officials, whom the sheep do not know and to whom they will not listen. Each one of these sets of characters, the thieves, the bandits, and the strangers is the counterpoint to Jesus who is known. Jesus repeats "I AM the gate" in verse 9, giving more specificity to what it means that he is the gate for the sheep. Whoever enters, presumably the sheepfold, through him will be saved, will be able to go in and out and find pasture.

The development of the image of Jesus as door or gate concludes, to an extent, in John Chapter 10, verse 10. The character of the thief returns alone, this time as the one who comes to steal and kill and destroy. In contrast, Jesus comes to provide abundant life. Singling out the thief foreshadows the role of Judas at the arrest of Jesus. The only other time in the Gospel of John that the term "thief" is used describes Judas in Chapter 12, verse 6.

¹ Professor Karoline Lewis, www.workingpreacher.com

This story of sheep and gatekeeper, and shepherd is about the journey to the cross and beyond. The enduring character in this story is Jesus himself. The misguided leaders of the synagogue do not figure in the resurrection appearances, it is Jesus alone who stands firm.

We do come across these religious authorities again and again as the disciples after they embark on their mission are dragged before courts and synagogues but each time they stand firm in the faith. Paul even uses his status as a Roman citizen to ensure that he takes the gospel message as far as the court of the Emperor.

So why is this passage plucked from a place earlier in the gospel, back before the arrest of Jesus, and plonked in the middle of the Easter season.

It would appear to me that is a reminder that the resurrection of Christ, a resurrection in which we share by virtue of our faith and baptism in the risen Lord, this resurrection is not the end of the story. There is more to come. The early church learned that, and we need to learn it again and again as well. And let's face it, we are sheep, and as sheep we easily get a bit off track. Attracted by what appear to be greener pastures we sometimes go wandering. And sometimes we are satisfied to just be sheep. To just sit around and enjoy familiar pastures where we've had a good feed. The problem with saying still is that we can overgraze the pasture and we are no longer nourished.

The gate does not just keep the robbers and thieves out of the fold, the gate is flung wide open so that the sheep can go out. The Shepherd does not just stand guard over the sheep, keeping them safe, he leads them out of the safety of the fold so that they can grow and flourish.

If we are to be an Easter people we must be an enlivened people pushed out of the comfort of the sheep fold, sent out into the hills and the valleys to gather in the lost, the lonely and the forgotten. We cannot afford to just keep warm our spot in the fold content with our own security.

Years ago, well slightly more than a couple of decades ago during a military exercise in the north of the country and army commander was given the task of protecting an airfield from which the an Air Force squadron was operating. He decided that the best way to keep the aircraft safe was to lock them away in their hangers and cease flying operations. Well he succeeded in his immediate task. The aircraft and the airfield remained safe and secure. The only problem was that they became totally and completely ineffective and the air war was lost and without air superiority the ground troops could not do their job either. The war game was lost. He thought he had done a good job because he had kept the aeroplanes safe but he had rendered them useless.

If we stay safe and secure in our pews confident that we share in the resurrection of the Lord and do not accept the challenge to grow in faith and in service then we will have lost more than just a wargame. We do not share in the

resurrection of the Lord just to feel safe in ourselves, we share that resurrection life so that others might come to know the risen Lord through us.

Robert Paget
11 May 2014

Readings

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:1-10

John 10:1-10