

Sermon for Easter 4 (April 13 2008) preached at Thropton

Gospel reading John 10:1-10

Jesus starts talking about thieves and sheep in the reading we heard from John's gospel this morning. His target is the bad teachers, the greedy priests and the whole system of corruption in the Temple.

Israel is often referred to as God's flock in the Old Testament . In Ezekiel we hear the oracle of the prophet: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? ³ You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no-one searched or looked for them.

⁷ 'Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.'

It is **this** context that Jesus talks about of shepherding - of preserving the flock in safety - not leaving it to its own devices. It is quite clear that the thief represents the present leadership of Israel. The thief acts for his own good, not that of the flock (hungry thieves might actually steal sheep for food); a decent shepherd risks his life to protect his flock from animals and thieves. But you see, Pharisees considered shepherds members of an unclean profession, and aristocrats despised them as vulgar lower-class workers. How could the righteous men listening to Jesus possibly identify themselves with shepherds? Ugh! Yet Jesus calls himself a shepherd. The Good shepherd.

The true shepherd has a unique relationship with his sheep. He may well not be the owner of the flock. He may be paid to look after them. But he is their own true shepherd. He **calls** them by **name**. He **leads them**, and **walks ahead of them**. The sheep respond by hearing **his voice**, knowing **his voice**, and following Him. Sheep are not the stupid animals we sometimes say they are. They often know the route to food, to water, to pasture. Up here they are very quick to come when the quad with the feed sack arrives. So too with the Middle Eastern shepherd - the sheep know him - he is the one who

feeds and waters them. They hear his distinctive call every day. They will never follow a stranger. Rather, they will scatter.

In the villages and towns there were communal sheep-folds where all the village flocks were sheltered when they returned home at night. These folds were protected by a strong door and only the guardian of the door held the key. But when the sheep were out on the hills in the warm season and did not return at night to the village at all, they were collected into sheep-folds on the hillside. These hillside sheep-folds were built with four dry stone walls with an opening on the sheltered side. There was no door of any kind. What happened was that at night the shepherd himself lay down across the opening and no sheep could get out or in except over his body. In the most literal sense the shepherd was the door.

Jesus calls himself the door. He means that it is he that has the authority to allow the sheep in and out. In John 14:6 Jesus says "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me." He is the gateway to heaven. And heaven is the life that Jesus promises. From this comparison with the door of the fold we get a great deal of our imagery in the later New Testament. The writer of the Book Hebrews says this:

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.

Jesus is the door that leads to life - life to the full. In one sense, "Life" was short for "eternal life," the life of the world to come; but Jesus links this with himself in the **present**. The life that Jesus is talking about is the life to be found in the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is coming - it is in the future. But it is here and now too. The kingdom is here - that is the message that John the Baptist bellowed on the rocks beside the river. It is the message that Jesus gave in the synagogue: Luke 4:20 "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." The Kingdom of God is to be brought in, by your witness and mine, till all have heard the message of Jesus - that he is the living water, the source of real life - the life that will not end.

Jesus says in verse 10: I am come that they might have life, and ...more

abundantly - not just to *preserve* but *impart* life, and provide it in rich and unfailing joy. What a claim! This business of the abundance, the sheer amazing bounty of God is actually lived out in Jesus.

At the wedding at Cana he produced 120 gallons - gallons mark you - of best quality wine. Amazing. And when he feeds the multitude there are baskets full left over. As Jesus says in Luke: Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. This is Jesus' philosophy - this is how he shows God to us. God is an abundant giver.

And Jesus goes much further. He gives absolutely everything to prove that God will go to any lengths in his love. Jesus actually goes to the cross to complete his mission of showing us what God is really like. To provide life for us, life to the full, Jesus is prepared to give up his own life. Ours is a God of paradox and mystery. But of this we can be sure: Jesus is the only one to whom we can turn for life - life to the full. And when we have been given this wonderful gift, it is our duty and our joy to tell others - to tell everyone. Freely we have received. So we **MUST** freely give.