

Easter 4

Okay good people, buckle down it's another one of those 'theological' ones.

If you want to set the scene for this passage it might be a good idea to look at the chapter before – if you want to get a gold star on your homework go and have a read of John chapter 9.

Jesus is, once again, being challenged by and is challenging the religious leaders in the area. He has performed a miracle, a sign, by healing a man born blind. There is no denying it – all the proof is there. They don't want to accept that Jesus has the authority from God – because that would mean that they had to listen to him, change their understanding, the way they lived and worshipped, everything really – so they put Jesus in the 'evil' box so they could dismiss everything he said and did. They refused to see, they refused the truth – therefore they were worse than blind. They were the blind leaders who claimed they could see, leading the lost – this usually leads to a bunch of people walking off a cliff.

The Pharisees claimed their authority over others by their 'knowledge' of the law and that they strictly observed all its little rules and requirements. If all you have is law this, I suppose, would be sufficient; Jesus, however, is unimpressed, he is here to move people beyond the law into a relationship with God. Their 'knowledge' is cold and removed from the caring and love that God truly looks for; so Jesus offers them some comparisons and this, finally, is where we begin the Gospel reading for today.

First we see a difference between the one who enters by the 'gate' and those who come to the sheep by a different route. Obviously here the one who enters by the gate is Jesus himself. He knows his sheep and his sheep know him. They trust him and follow him. How does this picture work? Well first we need to put aside our modern Western ideas on shepherds and adjust our thinking.

In the Middle East a community's livestock were often kept in one large pen – the shepherd would come and literally call the sheep that were his. Now to get a sheep to do anything sensible is difficult (sheep are notoriously stupid) but, like any animal, if they have learnt to trust they will respond. In this case the sheep trust that the shepherd will lead them to safe and plentiful pasture. So Jesus calls those who trust in him and he leads us to all that is right and good.

The others, those who do not enter by the gate, are trouble – they are only there to harm the sheep – it is ONLY the shepherd who has the best interests of the sheep at his heart.

I suppose that it is no surprise that the Pharisees didn't understand what Jesus was getting at, they probably saw themselves in the role of the true shepherds – no one likes to think of themselves in the role of the bad guys. They would have recognised the idea of the Children of Israel being portrayed in the picture as sheep in need of guidance, themselves as the good guys and the law as the way to God. So Jesus, realising that they still didn't see the truth, needed to explain further.

Really here, in this first section, the question becomes – What is the gate? What does it symbolise? These questions are made all the more important as, in the next section, Jesus states that he himself is the gate.

Again Jesus is talking to the Pharisees and he is claiming an authority all his own. For the Pharisees access to God is only through the law, in keeping it meticulously, and through the priesthood and the various cleansing rituals and sacrifices. Jesus here is laying that all aside – access to God is THROUGH HIM, and everything that came before is either suspect or does not need to be listened to. Is it any wonder that the Pharisees were ticked off with Jesus and considered him to be dangerous?

In a few short passages he lays aside their reverence for The Law of Moses, their reliance on their idea of being 'chosen people', calls them and others they venerate and honour thieves and bandits and declares himself – an itinerant northern preacher who breaks the rules and hangs around with some very disreputable people – to be the way to God! That is a massive claim and one that the Pharisees just could not accept.

So the gateway is Christ himself – but more than that, in my mind at least, it is his position as eternal Priest and one true sacrifice that entitles him to that claim and authority. By dying for us he is the one, the only one, who can open that gate for us. The Law pens us in, safe perhaps but hardly joyful or fulfilling. Jesus opens for us true liberty, true life and all that God intended for us.

By his death, his supreme sacrifice, the gate is opened for all – the trouble is that only those sheep who trust the shepherd, who respond to his voice, are led to where they need to be; to the good safe pasture where they thrive ... abundant life as it says.

It could end there – and I am sure you were hoping that it would :-)) – but there is one more bit that needs to be looked at because, I believe, it is a message for us and all who follow the shepherd... Those sheep who do follow the shepherd, it seems, can come and go –

*I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, **and will come in and go out and find pasture.***

Why would we go back into the enclosure? Perhaps it is an admission that we, the sheep, are stupid and sometimes do indeed turn our back on God and the life that he offers? Perhaps. But there is another possibility – Perhaps we, sheep who have experienced the joy of the good life, are meant to go back to encourage the other sheep to follow our shepherd too – after all sheep are notorious for following one another!