

'Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger's voice.' Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore Jesus said again,

'Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.¹ They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:1-11 NIV)

Intro

Artists have created many pictures of Jesus holding a lamb in his hands to signify his love and care; a picture that suits the time of dedication and blessing we've had this morning.

But notice in this picture that Jesus paints for our imaginations, the sheep are walking for themselves, sometimes being led and sometimes going in and out of various fields as they wish. There is an expression of freedom in the picture and that freedom comes from the sheep responding to the shepherd's voice, coming to him when he calls, following him when he goes on ahead and freely choosing which of his fields to graze when in a settled time.

That is a lovely part of this picture that Jesus paints. However, he also says some puzzling things such as being the one for whom the gatekeeper opens the gate, but at the same time *He is* the gate, such as being the good shepherd creating this safe space but of giving up his life for the sheep.

Safety and Freedom

We start with the theme about safety and freedom.

A few years ago, I was on holiday in mid-Wales. On one nice sunny morning as I was out cycling some of the hills, I came across a shepherd with his sheep and his somewhat stereo-typical sheepdog which was a lovely black and white collie...

Which reminds me – why don't farmers let their dogs eat melons? ... because they become melancholy!

¹ or, kept safe as they come and go e.g. already belong

Anyhow, back to the story. The farmer was driving a quad bike, and the sheep were in front of him as we slowly progressed along the lane, the dog sometimes near him and sometimes running ahead to keep the sheep moving when they were distracted by lovely things to eat growing alongside the lane.

“It’s ok’ said the farmer to me, ‘the sheep know where they’re going and they like it there - though they do need a little encouragement to get to the gate, else we’d spend the whole day just in the lane with them nibbling on the hedges!’

At some point in the past, that shepherd had led his sheep to the new pasture, but these ewes had done it before and now they led their lambs, with the farmer following along to make sure none got left behind and using his dog to help the sheep stay on track. The farmer would give the dog instructions from time to time or address one of the sheep directly if it was in danger of being left behind because it was focussed on nibbling the growth along the hedge. It was a nice experience and serves well to help us understand the picture Jesus paints:

There is a relationship between the shepherd and the sheep; they know each other and trust each other – the sheep trust the shepherd to guide them into good pasture and the shepherd trusts the sheep to follow and enjoy freedom in his pastures. The shepherd has the greater understanding and awareness which he uses to both lead and protect them.

Unless they are sick, stuck or lost the shepherd does not need to keep a tight hold of them but he helps them explore and enjoy what is good. This is very similar to a parent or carer of children; they will not learn to crawl, walk or gain confidence in life if the parent or carer is so anxious about their safety, they forever pick them up and hold them. Children, like the sheep of the picture, must be given agency to explore and express themselves, despite the mistakes and minor injuries they’ll pick up along the way – while the parent or carer provides the safe spaces and learning environment to teach wisdom that allows the child to gradually gain more confidence and wisdom in independence.

Jesus’ picture included his Father – who in his story is the gatekeeper – with whom he has that trusting relationship. This serves as a subtle model behind the story of the sheep; it is a close relationship but not a suffocating relationship.

How much trust are you giving to Jesus? Are you clutching on tight, or are you exploring the pasture he provides, keeping an ear out for his voice?

Or, are you not yet listening? Jesus’ picture was aimed at the Pharisees – we’ll come to them in a moment, but he assumes the sheep hear, recognise and respond to his voice, ‘he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.’ (verse 3)

His invitation to others is in other scenes. None-the-less, I’d like to invite all those who do not yet know Jesus the Shepherd, to respond to him and to learn his voice.



Growth at the side of the lane is not enough to sustain,
The lands beyond his courtyard prove fallow and hard,
Freedom? Fake and short when we forsake him and eternal life abort.
True freedom and flourishing are found through his gate.
Life to the full – both for now and when we become late!

The good shepherd lays down his life (v11) ... What's that about?

“The Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore, Jesus said again, ‘Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers.’” (v.6-7)

Jesus is talking to the very group of people, the Pharisees, who will later arrest him under charges of blasphemy and insist he faces the Roman punishment of death.

First, Jesus abruptly changed the picture from being the shepherd calling the sheep through the gate to being the gate. It is in that picture Jesus tells the Pharisees that those who have come before him were thieves and robbers. The Pharisees had not understood his picture (v.6) and so Jesus begins again, but more bluntly. In the previous scene he found the Pharisees guilty of casting out a man born blind (see John 9:35-41) and here he tells them that they are robbing the kingdom of God!

Despite their acts against God's kingdom, they thought they could come into the kingdom, hence Jesus' phrase about those who try to come in by some other way. (v.1) As J. Ramsey Michaels points out, the 'before' phrase of Jesus is not about time, but about standing before a door.ⁱ In this case the Pharisees have come before a closed door.

I'm sure they took great offence at this! Still, Jesus presses the point home, again abruptly changing the picture to say he is a good shepherd who lays down his life. He has just said the sheep will have life and life to the full - meaning both their physical life and their eternal life.

What use is it to them for him to lay down his life?

We later discover he chooses to lay down his life to enable the sheep to have that abundance of life – for Jesus becomes the gate through whom his sheep find eternal pasture when he defeats death and reconnects the sheep to the Father - who is eternal life. (more of this next time from John 11, life after death?)

Sheep of his field: Jesus' intends for his sheep to receive a life of freedom and trust. Let your faith grow in this encounter, heeding Jesus' voice and start taking risks to explore what life truly means.

Other sheep: come, hear and respond to his call so that you too may discover life and have it to the full. *amen*

ⁱ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICT (Grans Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), p.583.