

## **Easter 4 Year A**

### **John 10.1-10**

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*  
John 10.10

Fr Peter Groves

“Eisegesis” is a word used by Biblical and other scholars to remind us of the dangers of finding in a text that which we want to find. It means something like “reading in”, and at the moment, the lections set for the various Sundays of Easter find me worrying that I’m constantly engaged in this pastime. To my eyes, at least, it looks as though the gospels we have read for the past few Sundays have been deliberately targeted at us in our locked down state. Two weeks ago, we had Jesus appearing to the frightened disciples behind locked doors. Last week, we lamented the impossibility of going on a journey, but nevertheless celebrated the presence of Christ in the domestic hospitality of the supper at Emmaus. This

week, our concern is keeping the sheep within their fold. Perhaps someone is trying to tell us something.

Jesus begins his image of the flock and its safety by contrasting two ways of entering a sheepfold. The one who wishes to steal from the flock, will climb in surreptitiously. Only the shepherd, who has the care of the sheep, will enter by the gate, and the gatekeeper will open only to him. He is able to lead the sheep out from this place of safety and security, and his shepherding of them will keep them safe, because they recognize his voice and, by following him and staying together, they remain secure. If, on the other hand, the flock is attacked by a stranger, the sheep will scatter in fear and rather than enjoy the security of the flock, each will be left individually helpless.

The evangelist then tells us that the disciples didn't understand this figure or image, and so Jesus uses another. Not only does he enter by the door, he is the door. The picture here is of a circular sheepfold with a

high fence or wall, and a small gap for entrance and exit. The shepherd would guard the sheep by sleeping across the point of access, by making himself the door, so that any animal or robber which sought to attack the flock would have to attack the shepherd first. The sheep being his livelihood, he will defend them with his life. His presence is the guarantee of the flock's safety both within the haven of the pen and also on the journey to the pasture in which they will find nourishment.

So the characteristics of the shepherd are unfailingly positive: safety, protection, care, intimacy, and sacrificial love. In the verses which follow the gospel will develop the image even more explicitly by having Jesus call himself “the good shepherd” who lays down his life for the sheep.

The adjective in English which means shepherd-like is the word “pastoral”. We use that word frequently in a Christian context, and the church identifies the

shepherd as its principal image of what the world now calls leadership. Whilst it is true that there is some physical leading being done in the pictures Jesus paints, the proper role of the pastor in the New Testament is clearly very far from the heroically authoritative individual that the world expects leaders now to be. In troubled times such as these, strong leadership is much sought after. But the context for Christian leading is very far from the political or governmental stage. Christians who read this gospel are reminded that all pastoral ministry is merely a sharing in the shepherding of Christ, that first and foremost we are all sheep of his flock and following his lead and his voice, whilst also being the objects of his intimate and ultimate love. The contrast between the shepherd and the thief is not a contrast between a good and bad pastor, it is a contrast between that which is of God, and that which is not. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy: I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

We are being told that Jesus is the good shepherd, the true pastor, the one whose purpose is our abundant life. But we are also being warned of another, of the forces of theft and destruction, the opposite of our flourishing. This is not a picture of a cosmic battle, but an image of our own Christian lives. We are being challenged by Jesus to identify those forces of destruction, to know them for what they are, to know them as not of God.

These are the forces that seek to raid our loving relationship with God, to steal our sense of goodness and flourishing by filling our heads and our hearts with pride, with guilt, with doubt, with greed. We must ask ourselves what it is about us that is life-giving, and what it is that is destructive. The voices that nag within us of inadequacy, of deception, of failure; the voices that tell us that nothing we do is ever good enough, that nothing about us is truly loveable, that people who are kind to us are only under

an illusion that we are capable of friendship: these are not the voices of the shepherd.

Moments of crisis and fear such as we now encounter are the circumstances of choice for this sort of self-destruction. Anxiety in our present situation is absolutely to be expected. There is nothing wrong with being fearful when there is good reason to be fearful. Being naturally a little bit down or a little bit afraid, is nothing whatsoever to do with inadequacy. If we are worried when we should be worried, then we are probably functioning pretty well. The voice of the enemy within us, however, is the voice which preys upon these fears. And it is this voice which is not of God. We are confronted by those aspects of our humanity which try, from within, to scatter the flock, by filling us with fear and causing us to flee from fellowship and community, as if we are not right to mourn their absence; causing us to run from the other, or - worse - to judge the other, in order to save ourselves; trying to deceive us into thinking that

security is found in self-protection; trying to deceive us when we actually know that love and care and joy and life are found not by being on our own, but by realizing that we are not on our own, by hearing and recognizing the voice of Christ, by learning to love ourselves and others as he has already loved us.

The good shepherd is the one who calls, and the life which he offers is the word of love to all. The call of this voice is a call to look into ourselves as well as outside ourselves, a call which comes to us now with a very particular challenge, because it is a call to trust that good things are good, that God is at work in our lives. Our joy and our flourishing are the gifts of our true pastor. The words of the shepherd are themselves his love and care of every one of us. We follow him because we hear his voice. The voices of self-destruction cannot speak the words of love. The voice of Christ speaks nothing else, for love is the Word of God.