

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – Sunday 3rd May 2020

Acts 2.42-end; 1 Peter 2.19-end; John 10.1-10

The theme of chapter ten in the Gospel of St John, is Jesus' claim that he is the Good Shepherd, and this Sunday, the 4th Sunday in the Easter season, is often known as Good Shepherd Sunday. However in today's Gospel reading we don't quite reach that key verse where Jesus actually says, "I am the good shepherd." In fact there is a different though related focus; he says "I am the gate for the sheep."

These are two in the series of seven "I am" sayings that Jesus gives in St John's Gospel: "I am the light of the world", "I am the resurrection and the life", "I am the way the truth and the life", "I am the true vine", and "I am the bread of life". These seven "I am" sayings are a key theme in John's Gospel; and they have profoundly influenced both Christian spirituality and Christian theology.

The "I am" formula is the clearest way in the Bible in which Jesus claims to be God. It harks back to the story of Moses in the Book of Exodus, when Moses encounters God in a burning bush on a mountain. Moses asks "Whom shall I say that you are?" and God says, "I am that I am." In other words, the name of God is simply, "I am". He is the one who existed before Creation began, and he will still exist after Creation comes to an end. "I am that I am". So each time Jesus uses this formula, he is claiming (in a coded and theological way) that he is indeed God himself in human form.

The seven different sayings flesh out what this means, not in terms of theological principles, but in terms of the relationship between God and his people. They underline how the Christian faith is not at heart a religious system, but is at heart about a relationship with Jesus. If you want to be a Christian, you need to take your relationship with Jesus seriously, and each of the "I am" statements provides a wonderful and profound way in, to explore and develop your relationship with Jesus.

Mostly, the "I am" sayings of Jesus are immediately evocative, but in our reading today, we have one that takes a bit more thought, "I am the gate for the sheep". This doesn't seem quite to have the ring of "I am the light of the world", or "I am the good shepherd"; indeed it kind of sounds quite disappointingly impersonal, "I am the gate for the sheep".

However the people of Jesus's time didn't have things like locks and keys, or swinging gates and chains, so we need to put all these images out of our minds. Gates were just gaps in walls, and the way in which people and animals were kept safe, was with walls that were difficult to climb and gaps that were guarded. So when Jesus is saying that he is the gate, he is saying that he is the one who keeps the safe and true way.

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The “gate” is on one hand an image of safety and protection, and on the hand is the way to adventure and new pastures. This is not like a picturesque wooden gate in a garden wall, or a rustic farm gate, or great heavy gates to a castle. Rather the image is simply that of an open gap in a wall, through which in one direction there is safety and community, and in the other direction there is new life and adventure, with Jesus keeping safe and true the way to both, for people and communities and churches need both.

Think of that image for a moment. The open gap with all its opportunity and promise, a way to many sorts of good things in both directions, with Jesus standing by it, smiling, inviting. He is not in any way a menacing guard. Viewed like this, this saying is just as evocative an image as the rest of the “I am” sayings. “I am the gate for the sheep.”

As the Church and the Country and the world, stand amid much perplexing change, it is perhaps the Gate as the way to safety and community and mutual support that speaks most clearly to us at the present time. But we know also that soon it will be time also to find the courage to go out through the Gate and find those new pastures and adventure, and encounter our changed world. Indeed there are many who are already doing so and we will need to join them, to rebuild the life of our communities in so many ways.

Christians know that it is Jesus who stands in that liminal place, keeping the way to both safety and new life. He died so that he could be in that place for everyone. He rose so that the gate will always be a place of hope, whatever the future holds.

CJ. 03.05.20