

“I am the Gate for the Sheep”

Sunday July 25th 2010

Karen Senior

Readings:

Ezekiel 34: 1- 16

Psalm 121

John 10: 1 - 10

“I am the Gate for the Sheep” – that’s how Jesus describes himself, in the Gospel reading for this morning, and I have to admit that when I first read it I felt I had been given something of the short straw of the “I am’s”!

In the last few weeks we have had “I am the Light of the World” and “I am the bread of life”. Coming up there is “I am the good shepherd” and “I am the way and the truth and the life” but this morning we have Jesus saying “I am the Gate for the Sheep”... so what did he mean by that when he said it? And what does it mean to us, reading the words almost 2000 years later?

I’m going to ask Rachel to read the first bit of the passage again....As she reads, imagine you were in the crowd of listeners...and think what Jesus might have meant. ... (vv 1-6)

So if you were listening and thinking – “well ok – but what is Jesus talking about?” – then you are in good company because his listeners were puzzled too.

For us reading the verses in Sherwood in 2010, we might wonder if it’s more like an information broadcast from “Farming Today” or “Shepherds weekly”

It’s a bit clearer if we can imagine the social setting in 1st century Palestine when Jesus was speaking.

There is one point in our parish, opposite Oakley school, where I sometimes see sheep...other than that we expect to see them on farmland, and you don’t have to travel far out of Tunbridge Wells to see sheep in the fields by the road. When we were in Wales recently there were places where the sheep (and cows and ponies) behaved like they had complete priority over mere motorists!

In 1st Century Palestine, most village families in any small Jewish village, would own a few sheep. The houses had small walled courtyards where the animals could be kept at night, though some villages had a village sheepfold where the sheep could all be kept safe overnight. The sheep

would be locked in and someone would be on watch, because the 1st century equivalent of slipping through the double glazing to steal your laptop and wide screen TV was to climb the wall of the sheep pen with a knife, and start slaughtering sheep by sheep and chucking the carcasses over the wall to an accomplice, until the panicked bleating of terrified sheep woke the villagers.

Because each family only had a few sheep they couldn't consider employing a shepherd to look after them in daytime, so often the shepherding of the village sheep was done by the son (or a couple of daughters) of one of families. Only if there were no local options like that would the villagers club together and buy in the services of a shepherd.

Early every morning the sheep would be taken out of the village to graze in the open country. The shepherd would either call around the houses to collect the sheep, or would need to be let into the village sheep pen by the duty watchman. Think how most pet dogs respond to seeing the person who usually takes them for a walk appearing with a lead in hand – and the sheep were similar – ok they didn't bark and jump up and down, but they knew exactly who the shepherd was, recognised his or her voice, and were keen to get out and go with him.

And the shepherd knew the sheep as individuals and often gave them descriptive names – long ears, white face, and so on!

Which is all very interesting – but we didn't come to learn about first century Middle Eastern farming customs – so **WHY** did Jesus say all this?

The answer is to be found in chapter 9 of John's Gospel. It's very convenient for us to have the Bible parcelled up into chapters and verses, but the gospels weren't originally written like that, and when John committed his words to parchment, the bit Rachel read for us was simply the follow on from the bit before it. And before this curious little parable on the safety of sheep, Jesus had once again been upsetting the Pharisees.

Those of you who were here last week will remember that Brian was preaching from John chapter 8 where the Pharisees had asked Jesus:

“Who do you think you are?”

And when Jesus said:

“... before Abraham was born... I am”

The Pharisees were furious that Jesus was making what they saw as blasphemously bold claims about himself being the Son of God, and they accused Jesus of being demon possessed.

The next bit of John's book - Chapter 9 as we call it - begins with Jesus meeting a man who had been born blind. The disciples asked Jesus if he was blind because he was particularly sinful, or was it because his parents were sinful? Jesus denied both options as the reason for the man's blindness, but used the meeting as an opportunity to show the healing power of God, and gave the man the gift of sight.

That caused quite a stir amongst the people who knew the man:

"Isn't that the blind beggar who's always asking us for cash?"

"Well no it can't be because he can see - it must be someone who looks like him"

The man himself said "no - it is me - really it is" and he told them all about how Jesus healed his eyes.

When the Pharisees heard about this they continued denouncing Jesus "This Jesus can't be from God because he has broken the Sabbath laws".

The previously blind man was asked what he thought and not surprisingly he had only good things to say about Jesus - so the Pharisees started clutching at straws:

"Maybe he wasn't really blind at all - let's find his parents and ask them."

I imagine the parents were thrilled to see that their son could see, but they were not keen to get dragged into a dispute with the Pharisees and said:

"Ask him - he's old enough to answer questions for himself"

So they asked him and then the man got a bit cocky with the Pharisees and said:

"I've told you already what happened, why are you asking again - do you want to be disciples of Jesus too?"

The Pharisees saw that as the ultimate insult - they put him firmly in his place saying:

"You were steeped in sin at birth - how DARE you lecture us?" and they threw him out.

So ... Jesus one, Pharisees nil? But Jesus had more to say about the matter. When he next met the no - longer - blind man he asked him:

"Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

... and the man replied:

"I don't know who he is but if you tell me about him I will believe in him". So when Jesus explained he said "I do believe" ... and he worshipped Jesus.

Then Jesus told them this bit about sheep and shepherds and thieves and robbers, and good practice in sheep keeping. But he wasn't saying it to give helpful practical hints for shepherds; it was comment on the leadership of the people of Israel, which included the Pharisees.

Their treatment of the ex-blind man, as sinful scum to be thrown out of their holy and respectable presence, was about as caring as the sheep stealers who climbed the sheep fold wall while their accomplices waited outside for the carcasses ... In contrast - Jesus cared for the man and met his needs, and knew him by name.

The Old Testament Reading that Chris read from the book of Ezekiel uses the image of sheep and shepherds to reflect on the people and their leaders. The Old Testament uses this image in various places - and it's no coincidence that David the all time hero King of Israel began life as a shepherd - the lot of the youngest son in his family.

Ezekiel isn't the easiest prophet to read, but the whole of chapter 34 is about shepherds and sheep - and a promise from God that the bad shepherds who plunder the flock for the best meat and good fleeces but don't actually care for the sheep, will be removed from their duties and God himself will be the shepherd of his people....consider that a trailer for next week's "I am" which is "I am the Good Shepherd"

Meanwhile, the really observant among you will have notices that we still haven't worked out what Jesus meant in verse 9 when he said "I am the gate", so since we've been roaming beyond John 10 in our Bibles, Rachel is kindly going to re-read verses 7 - 10

This time Jesus say's "I am the gate for the sheep" and

"I am the gate, whoever comes through me will be saved. He will come and go out and find pasture."

And if Rachel had read on to verse 11, we would have the more famous "I am" which is next week's theme:

"I am the good shepherd"

Which all makes sense by going back to the practicalities of first century shepherding again. You see in the summer months shepherds would sometimes spend the night out in the open country with their sheep, but in the hours of darkness the sheep had to be kept safe from wild animals in roughly built stone walled enclosures, with thorny branches on top to deter sheep from scrambling out and dangerous animals from getting in.

There was no door to these, just a gap, and the gap was closed by the shepherd himself who slept across it.

So the gate for the sheep is the shepherd himself, and Jesus is the good shepherd. As the gate the good shepherd is the protector of the sheep, I guess putting himself at some risk, perhaps especially if he were the young adult son who knew how valuable the sheep were to his family.

So....What does it mean for us that Jesus says he is the gate for the sheep?

I don't want to try and say all there is about Jesus as the good shepherd – Brian will pick that up next week, but consider what it is that the shepherd offers his sheep in today's Bible passage.

He calls us by name and leads us out. The Middle Eastern shepherd didn't just see his flock as "the sheep" he knew than as individuals and as I said would name them according to their characteristics.

Jesus knows us as individuals, by name. Some of you here have been confirmed by Bishop Michael Nazir Ali – who whenever he confirmed people, or admitted them as Readers – and presumably if he ordained them or prayed for them in any other particular way – he always reflected on the meaning of their names. I always used to think, that's all very well but considering the names of some school children the time might come when that will be a great challenge to him! Karen means pure, apparently, but I don't know if my parents were aware of that when they chose it ...

The good shepherd knows me by name and knows me by character. By the grace of God he doesn't know me simply as the one who lets him down frequently, the one who has good intentions and blows them, by the grace of God he sees me with all the potential I have to become the person he has called me to be, here in St Philip's, but even more importantly out there in the community, with my family and friends, at the diocesan office dealing with difficult issues, on the road as I travel, and even in cyberspace as I interact with friends on Facebook.

The good shepherd goes ahead of us... and we know his voice.

We live in a world where we are bombarded by voices ... the radio, the TV, the internet, the world of advertising, our parents, our children, our colleagues ... the voice of Jesus can easily get overwhelmed. There are some Christians who easily say "The Lord said to me ..." about anything and everything. I would suggest that hearing God, and knowing where he is leading us is something most of us need a lifetime's practice to get

even half good at, and then usually because we are prepared to listen with others.

And that practicing has to have space, and quiet. God *can* break through the chaos and noise of our lives to speak to us ... But anyone in a relationship needs time with the other person, and if one week ends and another begins and you haven't had quality time together the relationship will be a little weaker ... And so it is with us and God, and it's us who are the ones who feel life is too busy to find that time – not him!

The good shepherd keeps us safe and provides for us. Ray preached a couple of weeks back about Jesus saying "I am the bread of life" and Ray said that Jesus offers people the ultimate spiritual satisfaction: If we believe in him, spiritually we will never hunger or thirst.

He went on to say that doesn't mean we escape the problems of life here on earth, that affect everybody whatever they believe – and he talked about his work as Hospital Chaplain when he sometimes meets Christian people who are devastated by getting ill. I'm not suggesting that meeting with life-threatening illness or life limiting disability, is something we brush off with a cheery "never mind praise the Lord" – Jesus doesn't promise us a problem free life, but whatever our circumstances he watches over us – our going out and our coming in as today's Psalm put it.

Finally – Jesus has come to give us life and to give it abundantly. There are many hints of that abundant life here in this life but this is just a shadow of the life to come which he promises us. I know that some of the home groups have had deep discussions on 1 Thessalonians 4 - falling asleep in the Lord and the resurrection at the last day. The good shepherd leads us – even through the valley of the shadow of death, and he can be trusted.