

Opening Prayer

I praise you, Jesus,
Son of the Living God.
The power of the Holy Spirit is with you to heal.
Blessèd are your death and resurrection;
and holy beyond all telling is the name of Jesus.
Holy Jesus, have mercy on us.
Fill us with grace and truth.
Give us power to become children of God,
and protect us always and everywhere
by the loving power of the name of Jesus.
Amen.¹

[John 10:1-10](#)

One habit we as a family have formed during this lockdown is of watching a TV show together while eating our dinner. Becky and Mark introduced Debbie and me to one of their favourites – ironically called Friday Night Dinner – which we also enjoyed. We then tried introducing them to Fawlty Towers, but they didn't get the humour and couldn't cope with the 1970s setting.

So the other evening, Debbie simply asked Becky to find something on the TV for us all to watch. She found a channel showing old re-runs of the last comedy that all four of us had liked – The Big Bang Theory. (Our dog Sheldon is even named after one of the characters.)

However, we didn't tune in at the beginning of the show. It had already started. We had to pick up the storyline as we watched.

And our reading today is like that. Just because it begins at verse 1 of John chapter 10 doesn't mean it's the beginning of this episode. The verse and chapter divisions of the Bible can be quite misleading in that respect.

We are joining in the middle of the story. Jesus is still in Jerusalem, attending the winter Feast of Dedication (or Hanukkah, as we know it today). He has healed a man born blind, but to the anger of the religious establishment, he has done so on a Sabbath. In their eyes he has broken the Sabbath by working, and they hold so fiercely to this that they drive the healed man out of the synagogue.

So Jesus' famous teaching about being 'The Good Shepherd' doesn't come in the warm, comforting tones that we think it does. It comes instead with an implication that if he is the Good Shepherd, there are also some Bad Shepherds or imposters around.

Jesus uses two images, or figures of speech, to make his point.

The **first** is where he calls himself **The Good Shepherd** (verses 1-6).

Characteristic of a good shepherd's relationship with his sheep, says Jesus, is that

³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger's voice.'

This sign of the sheep knowing the sound of the true shepherd's voice fits with first century culture, for as the New Testament scholar Ian Paul says,

First-century shepherds would indeed be able to name their sheep, who would respond to either a tune played on a flute by their shepherd, or the shepherd calling them by name. This was important, since it was common for several flocks and shepherds to share a sheepfold, which would indeed have a gatekeeper to ensure only those entitled could enter.²

The disciples of Jesus will listen for his voice or the music he makes. Remember how Mary recognised the risen Jesus when he called her by name. And anyone who seeks to fulfil truly the rôle of shepherd in the church (which is really only an under-shepherd to Jesus) will also want disciples to hear the voice of Jesus and the music he makes.

Who are the bad shepherds? Those who are more interested in you hearing and following their voices, rather than that of Jesus. They want to build their own reputations and empires. They want to impress you with how spiritual they are. They want you to be dazzled by their insight. They are more concerned to sell you their books and get you to attend their conferences than they are to point you to Jesus. Beware of them.

Right now in this pandemic there are many voices claiming to have insight into God's will and purposes. If you hear this clamour of voices, only give your attention to those who sound like the Jesus of the Gospels.

Don't assume that just because someone advances religious credentials, they are sound. Jesus' words about thieves and robbers who climbed into the sheepfold became pertinent. Remember that the crowd chose Barabbas over Jesus. And forty years later, when Rome crushed the Jewish rebellion and tore down the Jerusalem Temple,

there was such division amongst the different factions that more Jews were killed by other Jews than were killed by the Romans.³

Sometimes that could describe the church: we destroy ourselves more by our inner arguments than by what the outside world does to us. Our call is to listen to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, not the cacophony of siren voices around us.

The **second** figure of speech Jesus uses is where he mixes the metaphors and calls himself **The Gate** (verses 7-10).

In these verses, Jesus tells us that salvation, pasture, and life are all found in him and him alone.

- We enter salvation through the gate of Jesus, who lays down his life for the flock.
- We go in and out through him to find pasture, not because he feeds us but because he guides us to where we may feed. Even now, the job of a shepherd in the flock of God is not to feed the flock, but to show them where and how they can feed themselves.
- Through his death we find life in all its fulness.

What is that life? One famous (or, perhaps, infamous) American preacher named Joel Osteen, who leads a congregation in Texas, became famous partly through his first best-selling book. It was called 'Your Best Life Now'. You can imagine what people might presume from a title like that: the Gospel is an invitation to a life of prosperity, health, and comfort.

But that doesn't sound much like Jesus, does it? For Jesus, 'life in all its fulness' can only come when we become his disciples, with all the challenges that entails, along the deeply fulfilling joys. Joel Osteen's 'Your Best Life Now' will actually kill and destroy, because in embracing a 'Me, me, me' approach people will go about as far from Jesus as it is possible to go.

Don't misunderstand me. There are blessings that come from following Jesus. Some come in this life, and they find their fulness in the life to come. Not only that, Jesus loves to meet our needs.

But thinking we come to him just for what we can get out of him is wrong. The grace of forgiveness is most naturally followed by the gratitude of discipleship.

Conclusion

So what do we do about all this? Well, when Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd, he is taking on a title that God used in the Old Testament for his relationship with Israel. Ian Paul again:

what God was to Israel, Jesus now is to those who follow him.⁴

Jesus is not a slot-machine God: put in the money, get out the blessings. He is the One who laid down his life for the flock. And because of that, we have eternal security in him.

We would love to see an effective vaccine developed against COVID-19, and will rejoice when it happens, but our security does not depend on it. We would love to see the economy recovering, people back in work and students back in school and college, and will be glad when that begins too, but again, our security does not depend on those things. We shall be relieved when the frontline work of the NHS does not involve its staff risking their own lives, but doing so in peace and safety, and with good recompense, because that will be a good thing, but it is not ultimately what we live for.

No: we live to follow the voice of the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for us. As we respond to that voice, we shall seek the welfare of our society in every way, but we shall do that because the Good Shepherd is leading us to the eternal kingdom, not the United Kingdom, where, in the words of Mother Julian of Norwich, 'all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.'

Prayers

Listen, Lord,
listen, Lord,
not to our words
but to our prayer.
You alone, you alone,
understand and care.⁵

Deliver us, Lord, from every evil,
and grant us peace in our day.
In your mercy keep us free from sin
and protect us from all anxiety
as we wait in joyful hope
for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ;
for the Kingdom, the power
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.⁶

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

¹ *Celtic Daily Prayer From The Northumbria Community*; London: HarperCollins, 2000, p387.

² <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/jesus-the-shepherd-gives-life-in-abundance-john-10/>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Celtic Daily Prayer From The Northumbria Community*, p80.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p81.