

Easter 4 3rd May 2020

John 10:1-10

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In the last three weeks of this Easter season, we've heard three accounts of the resurrection – from Matthew, John and Luke's gospels. This week we jump back into the tenth chapter of John's gospel, to this very curious the deeply theologically packed passage about sheep, shepherds and a gate.

Unpacking this short passage is quite tricky, and so I've left the text up on the screen while I'm talking. It's tricky because it's a case of where John, who is a very sophisticated writer, mixes his metaphors.

If we're familiar with John's gospel, we'll recall that it has six statements about Jesus called the 'I am' statements. I am the light of the world

- I am the gate
- I am the good shepherd
- I am the resurrection and the life
- I am the way, the truth and the life
- I am the true vine

As well as these six statements, there is a seventh and it's a huge one...where Jesus, when asked to identify himself, simply says, 'I am' (18:6) which is a reminder of the story of Moses and the burning bush. When Moses asks the presence of God to identify itself in the burning bush, the voice says, 'I am', 'I am who I am'.

So what John is doing here is taking some very powerful statements, traditionally closely associated with God in the Jewish story, and applying them to Jesus.

Two of these metaphors get mixed together in this one passage – where Jesus is referred to as both SHEPHERD but also GATE. The image of Jesus as a shepherd, who leads his people (bleating sheep, BAHHH) into generous and lush pastures is a familiar one. We might remember the hymn 'The Lord is my shepherd'.

So the image of Jesus as shepherd, in John's gospel reminds the hearer of the 23rd Psalm, where the Psalmist says, 'The Lord is my Shepherd'; and a passage from Ezekiel where the prophet also speaks of God as a shepherd:

"For thus says the Lord God: behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them... I will feed them on the mountains of Israel...I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak"(Ezekiel 34:11ff)

This good shepherd-King is contrasted with bad leaders of the nation who are less interested in feeding the sheep than in feeding themselves. These selfish and corrupt leaders eat well themselves and they cloth themselves with the wool off the sheep's back but they do not feed the sheep. The sheep are exploited by the rich, are not protected – they are scattered so that they become food for wild animals because they've got no one caring for them. The prophet goes on to say that God will

rescue the people from these corrupt and selfish leaders – GOD himself will become the shepherd by establishing a prince in the line of King David who will make a covenant of peace, where even the land itself will be healed. So we can see that what John's gospel is doing is making a connection between this vision of Ezekiel and Jesus – the Davidic Prince; the prince of peace, who shepherd's his people with care.

So if Jesus is the good shepherd, why does John confuse things by mixing in this image of Jesus as GATE? If the colours show up on your screen, you can see I've highlighted the Good Shepherd image in green (sorry to any men who are colour blind). And there is the other intermingled image of Jesus not only being SHEPHERD but also GATE.

This is an image we might be less familiar with. What does it mean that Jesus is the GATE to the sheepfold? When you think of a gate, what comes to mind? I was reminded of our family visiting Melbourne a few weeks ago. We did a little train ride down to Brighton which is an old 'establishment' suburb of Melbourne. It has many very grand houses. Many of these houses have huge high thick stone walls making it impossible to see the house beyond the walls. And combined with the high walls are very high gates. Gates are portals between worlds. They keep the people inside safe and they keep unwanted types OUT. Sometimes grand old houses had gate-keepers who lived in a little cottage by the front gate. The gate keeper would check people's credentials and determine if they had the necessary entry requirements. As we may have seen in movies, the gate houses for military establishments, or the White House are staffed with people carrying big guns.

Mmm. I wonder what Jesus, or John, might be alluding too here? Can we spot a theme? If the sheep fold is an image of the Kingdom of God, then were there gate-keepers in Jesus' own day, who had a strong interest in being gate-keepers for the kingdom? Were they laying down rules and regulations which made it hard for people to feel like they belonged in God's kingdom? Were they laying heavy burdens on people's backs and making it hard for people to enter the kingdom? Were they using shame – a sense of social worthiness – as a weapon against people to suggest they were not WORTHY enough to come into the presence of God? It seems they were - in Matthew's gospel we hear Jesus having a go at the scribes and Pharisees, "*Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisee, hypocrites! For you LOCK PEOPLE OUT of the Kingdom of Heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them*" (Matthew 23:13)

This sheds light on Jesus's meaning when he says, 'I am the gate'. The gate to the kingdom – we might say, the interface between the human and God, is not a fortified 5 metre high stone wall. Neither is it a gate keeper carrying a big gun and checking people's worthiness credentials.

In fact, we discover, in Jesus, that our access to God has nothing to do with our own worthiness. Our access to God has been opened from God's side in Jesus, on the cross. The cross has become in some mysterious way, the portal between worlds. Now nothing can separate us from the love of God – NOTHING – zilch. Jesus is the gate. And if we want to push out the metaphor even further, we find that Jesus is a very vulnerable kind of gate because he subjected himself to our violence in the process of dissolving the heavily fortified gates which we build between ourselves and between us and God.

We have been freed from the need to show up to a gate with a gate keeper who is wanting to check our credentials. The common image in movies of St Peter standing at the gate and checking off people's worthiness on his little list has been proven as a great lie. Connection with God is not about OUR holiness but is God's initiative. We can entrust ourselves totally to the goodness of God who is

the gate (or the portal) AND the shepherd whose only concern is to lead us into abundant life IN HIM. Amen.