

Fourth Sunday of Easter

3 May 2020



Gospel *St John 10.1-10*

Jesus replied to the Pharisees ‘Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’

Homily

Every year on the fourth Sunday of Easter we contemplate the Risen Lord as the shepherd of his Church, and ourselves as his sheep. It is one of the main images of St John’s gospel, and so rich in meaning in relation to the rest of scripture that it is divided up for reading in the Eucharist over three years [vv.1-10 in year A, 11-18 in year B, and the reprise of the theme at vv.25-30 in year C]. This year we are *not* dwelling on the image of the Good Shepherd, but instead on the door to the sheepfold. Jesus declares, ‘I am the Door!’ (v.9) through which each disciple must pass. He is our spiritual pathway: listening to him, following him, and knowing him (vv. 3-4).

The image of a door has strong resonances at the moment while we are housebound due to the pandemic. In normal circumstances our front doors are signs that we do not live in prisons – as well as being to those who are abused at home a sign that in fact they do! They are signs of our *freedom*: that we we can come and go as we please. Our front doors protect our intimacy, but they also open out to freedom, to society, and to relationships and responsibilities beyond; and they enable others to enter our homes and be our guests. But for many at the moment our front doors have come to mark a rather worrying boundary, through which it is almost taboo to pass. If there’s an easing of the lockdown, many they say will be fearful to venture out.

Something of the same feeling, in reverse, is being felt by the Church. Although the preservation of life and the common good undoubtedly requires it, Christians inevitably feel sharply their exclusion from their churches, like being locked out of your own home. Our churches are true symbols; but they are also, more simply, our Christian family homes – God’s house where with brothers and sisters we gather around Christ, to offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, and to receive afresh from him the Spirit who enables us to pass back out of the church doors again to live and die with Christ, and to find new brothers and sisters in the world of men and women. In through those doors we come to be baptized and enter eternal life; and if we are blessed in this life our faith will carry us back out through them to eternal rest.

When Christ applies to himself the symbol of the door of the sheepfold—through which the sheep come and go—he reminds us of the Christian’s job of living daily by following him. We each recognize his voice, and he ours; and he both leads us and feeds us. This truth also implies a judgment: ‘Whoever does *not* enter the sheepfold through the door, but gets in some other way,’ says Jesus, ‘is a thief and a brigand’ (v.1). This much Jesus says in parable. But because his hearers prove to be a bit dimwitted, after verse 7 he begins to be explicit, explaining his parable by speaking about himself: ‘*I am the door* of the sheepfold’, he says. False prophets, false messiahs even, come ‘only to steal, to kill and to destroy’ (v.10a). In other words, they are interested only in their own gain and glory. I am *not* interested in my own glory, only the Father’s glory, and my way of life, a way of death-to-self so that my Father’s love may reveal itself. It is a way of life for *all* Christ’s disciples, but because it is Christ’s way it leaves particular responsibility on the pastors of the Church. Not because they are more elevated: quite the opposite. Because there is no such thing as *leadership* in the Church which is not first *follower-ship*. Jesus *alone* is the absolute sacrament of the Divine Shepherd (Ez 34.1), which was something well understood by St Ignatius of Antioch (one of the earliest martyrs after the generation of the apostles, and may be what we could call a spiritual grandchild of St John himself). ‘Christ’, he wrote, ‘is the Father’s door, through which Abraham, Isaac and Jacob enter, the prophets, the apostles and the whole church’ (in his letter to the *Philadelphians* 9.1). Jesus is, we could say, the door between the worlds by whom we make our own *safe passage* through death into life.

If our Gospel passage contains a judgment on a *false* teachers, it also gives us an encouragement for the majority of disciples. As the sheep are able to pass freely in and out of the sheepfold through the door, they come to know, to recognize and to trust the voice of their shepherd. Conversely, they learn to know to run from the stranger whose voice they do not know, or recognize, or trust. In other words they come to discern the true pastor, and true teaching. Pope Francis talks of the smell of the *sheep*, emphasizing that that is what the shepherds needs to know; but we can also speak of the sheep’s intuition of shepherd. An ancient Christian text, just a bit earlier than St Ignatius whom we heard from just now, affirms that a true teacher can be distinguished from a false one because he will ‘have the *behaviour of the Lord*. From their behavior the false prophet and the true prophet shall be distinguished.’ (*Didaché* 11.8). The sheep have this discernment about their teachers and what is being taught.

This intuition is gained by Christians both by being taught by the Good Shepherd, whose word and behaviour they know from the Gospel and trust; and also by the continuous effort of their discipleship as they follow their master, observing, and listening to, and imitating, what their master is saying and doing – much as Jesus himself claims to see, and hear, and imitate what his Father is saying and doing. It is something developed patiently, over time, and sometimes learned the hard way. But it always comes with that *relationship*, and with a disciple’s daily task of conversion to the master. Whatever claims are made for various kinds of technical, scientific or artistic knowledge – important as those things are – they don’t actually substitute for the kind of knowledge and discernment that builds faith and expands hope and deepens love, which take time and are built on relationship with Christ and Christ’s body.

This is the relationship that we are used to sharing by leaving our homes and gathering together in church as God calls us to be guests in *his* house: to pray, to listen to his word, and to celebrate the Eucharist. We pray that it will not be long before we can begin to resume our life together and our service in the community. But in the meanwhile we must all (not just the Christians, but everyone who is currently living behind closed doors) get used to another idea: that the Lord comes to *our* house; comes to knock on the door of *our* life; comes to meet us in the places and times of our frustrated or frightened daily existence; comes to offer us, or to strengthen, a bond of friendship. He says, ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my

voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.' But he knocks because he wants us to cross the threshold, to share in *his* time, *his* life, *his* eternity.

Prayer

Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: grant that, as by your grace going before us you put into our minds good desires, so by your continual help we may bring them to good effect; through Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen.