

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A (VIRTUAL) HOMILY 2020

### WHAT'S THE GATE AND WHO'S A GOOD SHEPHERD?

*Jn 10.1-16 Acts 2.36-41 1Pt 2.10-25*

*Welcome once again, to all, in this time of coronavirus, as most of us continue our quieter lives at home, whilst appreciating with great gratitude the efforts of those who continue to serve in the medical and education fields, and service industries in general.*

*On a personal parish note, on Friday this last week, we celebrated Requiem Mass for one of our long-term faithful parishioners, Tess Fogarty, wife of Ray for 64 years, mother of 6, grandmother of 26, great-grandmother of 6, no mean feat. Up until now, she was still running the parish seniors' card group and actively involved at weekday Mass, until the lockdown. A very spiritual person of deep faith, she didn't just look up with hands joined, but also was actively involved in parish and community service in many diverse ways. With livestreaming, her extended family were able to participate in thanksgiving for a life well lived. We commend her to God and give thanks and learn from her example of a well-lived life of faith, love and service, and offer our sympathy to her loving family.*

And now, in today's Gospel, John portrays Jesus with mixed metaphors, as the gate into, but significantly, also from, the safe haven or enclosure to protect the sheep, and then the Good Shepherd. It has become known as "**Good Shepherd Sunday.**"

It is significant that Jesus' followers are described as sheep, coming directly after Jesus heals the blind man (*as we heard before Easter*), ending with a critique of the disparaging Pharisees who will not see the goodness of the man Jesus, nor be open to understanding his message, nor just what being a 'good' shepherd meant, as leaders pastorally concerned for the people, whom they were meant to lead.

It might be assumed that the religious leaders of the time saw shepherding as a downmarket occupation for the lower classes, with shepherds portrayed as ritually unclean, mangy, bathless and smelly, on the outer, and not really meant to be part of mainstream Jewish life, and certainly not religious practice. Yet, remember, they were there at the beginning in simplicity of Luke's Nativity scene, in accord with Luke's theme of poverty. They respond eagerly and go to Bethlehem, welcomed and included from the start.

Even if seen in negative terms, their profession or occupation was an essential service. And then we need to consider their attentiveness and care for their sheep, and the harshness of the conditions in which they worked and cared for their flock.

My problem with sheep, as a metaphor for humans, is that I once perceived sheep as somewhat down the scale on animal intelligence. Instinct is one thing, but a capacity for individuality is another. My prejudice came from a country chap tooting his car horn along the road outside a sheep paddock, and one took off, and the others mindlessly followed, or so I thought, as we tend to see them as good for being eaten and producing wool (both costly these days), among the first animals to be domesticated in Mesopotamia around 10,000 BC, did you know?!

Having been challenged on my perspective, I consulted Dr Google, only to find the research (*and we should always take note of the science, not the illusion, whatever the subject!*), stating thus: “*Sheep are one of the most unfairly stereotyped animals on the planet... Sheep are not stupid, and they are not helpless either... Sheep are actually surprisingly intelligent, with impressive memory and recognition skills. They build friendships, stick up for one another in fights, and feel sad when their friends are sent to slaughter. (They are also one of the most destructive creatures on the planet)... Boredom results from an overly predictable environment... Intelligent, complex, sociable...* ”. Says PETA: “*Sheep are gentle, sensitive animals who are emotionally complex and highly intelligent... Recent studies have found that sheep and humans have many things in common... Scientists...(have) discovered that sheep have brain power to equal rodents, monkeys, and in some tests, humans.*” So there, another myth busted by objective research, and I stand corrected from my earlier misconceptions!

Then the need to transfer this understanding to the scriptural references, means that you and I are given minds, with which to think, intelligence to discern, and consciences to be formed and informed, before we exercise our own free will in saying and doing the right thing, easier said than done! And in our own way, all are called to be good shepherds to others in our lives,

The imagery of Jesus as the gate, used today, is not so much to take refuge from the wicked world out there, as to find security and serenity in being followers of Jesus, the true shepherd who cares for each one of his flock, so I see it more as about inclusion and support as we gather together, but we need to enter and exit via that gate as well, in order to actively engage also, with the wider world out there. We are not here to escape the world, but to be a positive influence, engaged in it as active agents of change, in the spirit of Jesus.

And so much is being written, about our changed and uncertain circumstances, in this weird time of coronavirus, where we have to stay at a distance for our own good, and perhaps moreso the good of others. But remember, we can go out for a walk (*sort of avoiding each other at 1.5m*), shop for necessities and communicate virtually, both auditorily and visually, which has to make us appreciative of the marvels of modern technology, and our need to use it appropriately and productively. We are learning new ways of doing things, and a bit of lateral thinking goes a long way. There’s also the opportunity to take life more quietly and reflectively, perhaps with more time for reading, music, film, crosswords, jigsaws, gardening, personal engagement with those whom we love, at home, in our family environment. (*One*

*advantage I have found, being solo at home, is that I can talk to myself without my hearing aids and false teeth!)*

Some purist theologians and liturgists are critical of what we are doing right now, for example, saying that virtual Eucharist is nothing like the real thing, but the fact is that we are engaging, reflecting and praying together, whatever about the details, means that there is a sense of connection and belonging, as well as that sense of friendship and support, despite the limitations of distance and physical disconnection.

*In fact, here we are in Easter time, aware of Jesus' promise to be with us always, as a virtual and a real presence, but not physically, as we take his Word to heart and continue to strive to live it. Meanwhile, let's all hang in there, with patience and hope, knowing that this difficult time for all of us, will eventually pass.*

*john hannon*

*3rd May 2020*

---