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## Sermon

### ***Christ the Good Shepherd***

**John 10:1-10; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25**

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The theme of this fourth Sunday of the Easter season is Christ the Good Shepherd. As I have pondered the passage in John 10 I became more convinced that it directly relates to the account just before of the healing of the man born blind. There is, of course, debate about whether the two accounts are directly connected, but there is strong support in the commentaries for the possibility.

What had happened in John 9? Jesus had encountered a beggar who had been blind since birth. It was the Sabbath but he had simply healed him. The man was questioned by the Pharisees who were upset because he had been healed on the Sabbath – therefore they said the healer cannot have been a good man. They questioned his parents who will only admit he was blind and say they don't know anything more. John tells us they were afraid of the leaders who had announced anyone saying Jesus was the Messiah would be expelled from the synagogue.<sup>1</sup>

The formerly blind man is questioned again and with considerable courage (or cheek) says he has already told them and wonders if they wish to become his disciples! When they say they don't know where Jesus comes from he replied:

"Why, that's very strange!" the man replied. "He healed my eyes, and yet you don't know where he comes from?" <sup>31</sup> We know that God doesn't listen to sinners, but he is ready to hear those who worship him and do his will. <sup>32</sup> Ever since the world began, no one has been able to open the eyes of someone born blind. <sup>33</sup> If this man were not from God, he couldn't have done it." <sup>34</sup> "You were born a total sinner!" they answered. "Are you trying to teach us?" And they threw him out of the synagogue. [NLT]

When Jesus heard what had happened he went to find the man and asked him if he believed in the Son of Man. The man did not know who that was and Jesus says, "You have seen him and he is speaking to you!" At that the man said, "Yes, Lord, I believe," and worshipped him.

**Verse 39** Then Jesus told him, "I entered this world to render judgment-- to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind." <sup>40</sup> Some Pharisees who were standing nearby heard him and asked, "Are you saying we're blind?" <sup>41</sup> "If you were blind, you wouldn't be guilty," Jesus replied. "But you remain guilty because you claim you can see. [NLT]

Chapter 10 starts, "I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber."

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<sup>1</sup> 9:22

The blind man was excluded from the synagogue. Jesus goes on to talk about his being the way in and out. He is the one who gives access to God's flock and the safe gathering place for them. He is the one who leads the sheep or the people of God. Yet this one has been excluded by the local keepers of the gathering place for believing in him.

At this point it is helpful to talk about Middle-Eastern sheepfolds. Here is a photograph of one we saw in Nazareth. It is a replica to show the sort of structure used to protect sheep at night. Often it would be some fencing around an alcove in a rock face.

Here is the equivalent with the Maasai nowadays - a corral for cattle, using dead thorn bushes as the equivalent not just of barbed wire but razor security fencing! Usually, in Israel, there was no gate closing the opening but the shepherd lay down on the ground in the opening to guard the sheep through the night. Hence Jesus can say he is both shepherd and the gate. The word used for gate covers the meanings of gate and gateway.

The risk of loss was and is very real. John Qbei who visited us from Tanzania told me he had had a herd of goats wiped out in two attacks from a leopard. King David spoke of defending the sheep against a bear and a lion. And then there were thieves.

Jesus makes the comparison twice. First time, it is more about the true shepherd being recognised and leading his sheep. The sheep recognise his voice and follow him but run from a stranger. There is obvious relevance to this new believer who has recognised his voice (he couldn't see his face first time) and he has followed Jesus out of the sheepfold. But the general principle applies to us all, we need to recognise and follow the voice of Jesus speaking to us in everyday life.

One of my commentaries comments that the Hebrew word for "shepherd" is taken from the root word *ra'ah*, which is the Hebrew word for "best friend." Do you recognise the voice of your best friend when you hear her/him speak? Yes you do. When you know someone well, you can recognise them easily from a glimpse, a silhouette, even the clearing of the throat. Once I arranged to meet a friend I hadn't seen for some years at a café. As I waited, I looked up and saw someone walking towards me in the distance – too far away to see the face. But I knew it was my friend from the walk. I hadn't consciously realised before that he had a distinctive gait but when I saw it, I knew it was he.

Jesus really is our best friend. He has given himself utterly for us. As Peter said in his Epistle (v24), "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree ...; by his wounds you have been healed."

He has loved us and rescued us. He has given his life for us. He has come to the sheep pen and called you out. Or maybe he has found you wandering and brought you back from danger. "For," as Peter continued, "You were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."<sup>2</sup> If you are a Christian in some way you have heard him call you and have responded. So keep following that voice, that leading. Follow the shepherd who is your best friend.

Do you remember that sheep in the Middle East are not driven in large flocks as they are in the West? The shepherd leads the sheep which know him and follow him. Some shepherds play on a pipe and the sheep learn to recognise that tune. Often several flocks would be put in a sheepfold overnight together yet in the morning each shepherd would call his flock which would follow him to pasture.

Do you recognise your Saviour's call? Like my recognising my friend's gait you may not realise that you do, but when you hear it you know – that is his voice! And there is an excitement within.

Be careful to listen for the voice of Jesus the true shepherd. There are many other voices - false teachers who distort the Bible because they can't or don't want to believe. Don't give them soul room.

There are those who are scaremongers and alarmists. There are any number of foolish conspiracy theories going around at present. There always are but they have a higher profile at present because people are nervous and have had more time on their hands to indulge in following their material.

I am amazed at how readily people believe nonsense. Please, use your head. Think about what people announce to you on Facebook, Twitter, Youtube or wherever. It is not true merely because someone says it. Being published on the internet does not lend authority or authenticity – anyone can post anything.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 1:25

Looking back, I realise that I was trained to listen for what was true and what was false. In a church I formerly attended, there was poor Bible teaching, but the Lord had told me to stay. After a few years, I was talking to a guy who went to church where there was a very good teaching pastor. He said to me, "The pastor said such and such." I said, "Well is it true?" He was startled and asked, "Why wouldn't it be?"

I said, "He's only a man and may be mistaken – what does the Bible say?" To my surprise, my friend had never thought to question or check the teaching he received. Whereas I had been trained by hard experience to review everything. I am not claiming to have infallible discernment myself, I am just saying we need to think about what we hear and check it out.

Some of the fears I am hearing is that this pandemic is a judgment sent by God or that it is a sign of the Last Days. Remember that there are sicknesses and disasters merely because we live in a fallen world.

As to this being a sign of the last days, there have been many plagues before today which have been far worse. Jesus said in Luke 21:8ff:

"Don't let anyone mislead you, for many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and saying, **'The time has come!' But don't believe them.** And when you hear of wars and insurrections, **don't panic.** Yes, these things must take place first, but the end won't follow immediately." Then he added, "Nation will go to war against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and there will be famines and plagues in many lands, and there will be terrifying things and great miraculous signs from heaven. "But before all this occurs, there will be a time of great persecution."

Don't believe the many who come in His name saying the end has come. He goes on to say that there will be great signs in the heavens. Those things haven't happened. If you are anxious about that, hear the words of Jesus, "Don't panic!"

What we can say is that it is a good time to keep close to God. He is your refuge, your safe place. He tells us over and over again to trust him. So return to your first love of him and take shelter in his care for you. When you actively choose to trust him, you exercise faith. Trust what he says in his word. Discern what he is saying to you today.

Jesus repeats and varies his analogy from verse 9 saying, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved." The same idea occurs in John 14:6: "I am the Way... No one comes to the Father except by me." If you want to be saved, if you want access to the divine – Jesus is the doorway, the entrance, the gate, the way. He says he and only he is the way to the Father.

When you find entrance through Jesus, will come in and go out and find pasture. Do you hear the freedom of access – come in and go out. Do you hear the provision? "Find pasture."

The same promise is found in Psalm 23, "Yahweh is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me besides quiet waters, he refreshes my soul."

He is the one who provides for you and knows what you best need.

David continues in Psalm 23, to speak of guidance, protection and comfort. And that the goodness and love of the Lord will pursue us all our days. We will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Jesus said that he had come so that we might have life and have it to the full. That word means: overflowing, excessive, extraordinarily. Jesus died and rose again so we might have extraordinarily, overflowing abundance of life! Let's live the life he intends us to have. Amen.