John 10:1-10

Some fifty years ago I was training to be a teacher in England. Early on in the course we had to visit a primary school or elementary school for two weeks. I was in the group of students who had as their main subject Religious Education. We chose as our topic, Jesus the Good shepherd. This was my idea, as I had just bought set of newly published materials on this theme. I thought I was pretty cool in those days and the material was pioneering. It was very aware that young children think in quite a different way to adults. Therefore, if you say to a child, Jesus is the good shepherd, they don’t really understand what you are saying. So, we spend six hours, maybe even more, talking about farmers and sheep and sheep dogs. We probably made a farm in that time, so that our lecturer would think we were A students. We might even have let the kids near the glue. In those days they didn’t sniff it.

Now this morning I am going to preach on the gospel we have just heard. It is about Jesus the good shepherd and I hope I don’t have to talk about farmers this week and next week hire a sheep and bring my sheep dog along. That might be fun until someone has to play the part of the shepherd and sleep with the sheep or even worse be the thieves who break in and steal them. Imagine running down Frankfurter Strasse with a sheep under your arm. Not a good idea. Therefore, I shall take the risk, that you know a bit about shepherds.

Of course, the people who Jesus was speaking to in this reading knew a great deal more than us. We don’t exactly where or when he spoke, but this the last block of teaching in John’s gospel follows on from chapter 9. In chapter nine we have the healing of the man born blind. That takes place in Jerusalem. Although it was the leading city in the province of Judea, it wasn’t that big and the country round about was a centre of sheep farming. Don’t forget, just a few miles south was the place, where the shepherds were tending their flocks by night. What exactly did that mean?

It meant that they had led the sheep from the pastures to a walled circular area, with just one way in- a gateway with a door. When the shepherd or a small group of them, as in the Christmas story, had led the sheep into the coral or sheep yard they would then close the door. In more primitive places, there would be no door and the shepherd slept at the entrance to block things coming in and sheep going out.

At first light, the shepherds would lead the sheep back to the pasture, which would have to be constantly changed to avoid overgrazing. If he was a good shepherd, he would take his job seriously and keep a constant eye on his sheep. The sheep were in danger of wandering off, so when they started to stray he would call them by name and they would come back. It sounds incredible, but this was quite common in the Middle East until quite recently. The other need for attention was the possibility of human or animal predators taking one of the sheep. Like the boy David, who later kill the giant Goliath, you have to be pretty good with a sling and a stone. The commitment of the shepherd to the sheep was the most important aspect of the job. Of course, if you had to hire in labour, you took two risks. The first is that they wouldn’t be bothered to do the job properly. Their first priority may be the wage and then they might do the bare minimum. Even worse, they might run off if thieves or wild animals came and make no effort to protect the flock.

So in an agricultural economy, where nomadic farming at first dominated and later was still very important, shepherds were mega! Of course, the image of shepherds was greatly enhanced by King David, he was the shepherd boy who became the greatest King of Israel. Not only that he was musically gifted and his psalms or the ones he commissioned refer to God as a shepherd. The most famous of these and the best loved to this day, is of course, The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures..

I am sure that this psalm has been a great comfort in times of difficulty to a great many of us here this morning. It is good to know of the tender concern and constant care that God has for each us, even when we feel lost and alone. There is never a time when the Good shepherd averts his gaze from us, there is never a place he cannot go and there is never an enemy that can overcome him.

But there is more to God that is revealed in this picture, or for the highly educated this allegory. In biblical times the shepherd was the undisputed leader of the flock. Dr Leon Morris of Australia points out that “Jesus is thus set forth in this allegory as the true ruler of his people, in contrast to the false shepherds.” (The Gospel of John -Erdmans p 498) The false shepherds don’t really care. They have their own agenda, powered by their lust for money, pleasure and control. But Jesus is the kind of leader that we long for, attentive, caring and prepared to lay down his life for others. In this way he brings life and not destruction to his people.

Although, this powerful picture of God dominates this last block of teaching in John’s gospel, another picture stands out the bit of it, I read this morning. Jesus talks about being the gate. To be honest, this picture does make the speech a bit more complicated, because Jesus says one minute, I am the shepherd and then one minute later, he says I am the door. Of course, they are one and the same if you have the primitive type of sheepfold. But the gate keeper is a very different kind of role. In fact this is not a cosy, cuddly, feel good picture. It is a strong criticism of those who are in positions of leadership in Judah at that time. He describes them as thieves and bandits. Both are not in the least interested in the sheep, only in themselves. Prof Alister Mc Grath of Oxford University says ,’This powerful image makes the following point: there is only one way in which sheep can find safety and that is through him. Only through Jesus can anyone come in from the dangers of a fallen world and find safety and rest inside. Anyone who enters through Jesus will find salvation, pasture and life.” (A. Mc Grath NIV Bible Handbook Hodder and Stoughton p375.

Now, if you are really wide awake this morning, which I sadly cannot claim for myself, you will have noticed that Professor Mc Grath says the word only twice. There is only one way the sheep can find safety… Only through Jesus can anyone come in. This does not fit in with much of the thinking within our society, which speaks of many roads to find God. It is also probably at odds with the teaching of many of the churches you have visited. I realise this and spent quite a bit of time researching this last night. The idea that the whole of creation, including the devil himself will be saved is very old within the theology of the church. Three leading early church theologians, Clement of Alexandra, Origen and Gregory of Nyassa taught this idea. The doctrine was strongly opposed by Augustine and both the Catholic and Protestant churches taught that salvation is only found in Jesus. However, during the last century and a half it has often been taught that people of other faiths will find salvation.

Much can be said about this discussion. It is often formulated in very simplistic ways on both sides.

My own understanding is a bit of a dodge, but it may be helpful to you. The fundamental question in this debate is simply who will or who will not be saved ? Whenever, I have been asked to make important character judgements, I have often been faced with my lack of information and my limited ability to discern the truth. So how can I make judgements on the lives of others. But I do know something for sure. Jesus said that he was the way to life. By following Jesus the good shepherd I have found life and so have you hopefully. That does not mean that you have not gone astray. It does not mean that you have not been seriously hurt by the people around you. It does not mean that we live in a perfect world. But if each of us follows Jesus something does happen to us. It was describe by a former dealer in human slavery this way. I am not what I should be, I am not what I hope to be , but by the grace of God I am not what I was. That man was John Newton, who wrote the hymn amazing grace. More important he was a decisive influence on a young member of the English parliament called William Wilberforce- a man who changed English society and led the British Parliament to be the first in the world to abolish the slave trade and then slavery in every British territory. And with due respect to Winston Churchill, that was our finest hour. So when Jesus says he is the gate of the sheepfold. It is not an invitation to a theological debate, it is a call to sacrificial action. We are asked by the good shepherd to follow him along winding roads, through dark valleys, through sunshine and storm so that we might find life. Not simply when this life ceases, but a life that begins the moment, we say to Jesus , yes, I will follow you.

This is not simply a pious and personal decision, it is a game changer. It may be a call to change your career, to change your attitude to your partner, to give more genourously like the church in our first reading, or to enter a deeper level of fellowship within the church like theirs. I cannot begin to guess, where Jesus will call you or even I. But I do know one thing. We must share the life we have found with others, not to save them from the hell to come, but to save them from the hell they are going through right now. Obviously, not everybody is struggling. Some people have a charmed life, but even they have family and friends that need some help. So we are here to listen to the call of Jesus to us and follow.