

the 'good' shepherd?

a sermon preached on the
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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Acts 4.5-12, Psalm 23, 1 John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

This fourth Sunday in Eastertime is also known as good shepherd Sunday. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."¹ There was presumably no need to introduce the adjective 'good' – apart from the fact of there being 'bad' shepherds. Unlike these counterfeits, the good shepherd knows his own and does not abandon them when trouble comes.² This good shepherd is known by the Father, and knows the Father.³ This good shepherd's voice is recognisable to the sheep.⁴ Earlier in chapter ten, Jesus declared that he is the 'gate for the sheep',⁵ and also the gatekeeper.⁶ So according to the evangelist, Jesus declares himself to be simultaneously a gate, a gatekeeper, and one who leads others, sheep, through the gate.

I invite us to reflect upon this paradoxical teaching: Jesus declares himself to be a gate, as well as a gatekeeper, as well as the one who leads others through the gate. In one image, a barrier – a threshold through which something may, or may not, be allowed to pass. In another image, an authority – capable of either closing or opening the threshold. In a third image, a guide – who is capable of assisting others to move from one place to another.

How can Jesus simultaneously be the barrier, and the authority who guards the barrier, and the guide who assists others move through the barrier?

Today's gospel paradox can assist us to reflect upon an aspect of our religion which has become so pressing in our time: that people fervently believing in the Christian 'good shepherd' have perpetrated outrageous crimes against others, as evidenced in every kind of Christian imperialism and triumphalism. We may comfort ourselves that this is just history, but increasingly people do not accept our rationalisation. In our necessary outrage about the dark deeds of 'Islamic State' we need to remember this uncomfortable fact of our own history – and face up to the fact that the 'good shepherd' is still being used as a bludgeon by Christians. We don't have to go far to see this at work. Within our own Anglican Communion the latest variant of this is misleadingly calling itself 'Confessional Anglicanism' – mobilising to bludgeon the rest of the church according to its claim to be the only bearers of truth.

The besetting sin of religion is literalism: an uncritical belief in the 'inerrancy' of Scripture, so-called 'simple Bible believing'. The consequences of this sin have become critical in our time. Religious literalism of every kind is 'on the nose' in the Western, developed world – though on the rise wherever poverty, oppression, ignorance, and the after-effects of imperialism or totalitarianism are still being felt. Many have observed the deadly connections between religious literalism and the multiple global problems we now face. The eminent scholar Karen Armstrong has conclusively demonstrated that Christian, Jewish and Islamic fundamentalism share equally in this malaise.⁷

Thus, many now wonder whether it's *safe* to practice a faith with the Christian 'good shepherd' at its centre?

¹ John 10:11

² John 10:13

³ John 10:18

⁴ John 10:4

⁵ John 10:7,9

⁶ John 10:3

⁷ Karen Armstrong, *Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, New York: HarperCollins, 2000.

The message that so desperately needs to be communicated is that literalism is not sanctioned by the church in its essential teachings – and never has been. We Anglicans are easily caricatured as though we don't know what we believe. But this is because Anglican tradition has never accepted that Scripture is the only source of truth, and never forgotten that Scripture cannot be taken only at the literal level. This is exactly why so-called 'confessional Anglicanism' is not in fact Anglican at all.

Looking to the early 'church fathers', we remember that Scripture has a literal meaning, yes – but that this literal layer is not the whole meaning of Scripture. Indeed, the early fathers and mothers taught that one could only understand the *literal* meaning of Scripture by grasping the *symbolic* meaning of Scripture.

Tragically, one consequence of the triumph of science, reason, the 'enlightenment, and the Protestant Reformation has been the near-loss of the symbolic function in Christian spirituality. Unlike our early church forebears, our capacity to reflect symbolically is severely impoverished. The early church fathers understood that the reading of sacred Scripture was not merely an intellectual task – but in fact more truly a mystical one. Sacred Scripture's purpose is fundamentally mystical: that is, to lead a person into the depths of God and their own being; and thus into communion with all people; and indeed the whole creation. If read literally, the early church teachers would have said, a person is unlikely to meet God – but only a tribal god fashioned in their own image. Thomas Merton, one of the 20th century's acknowledged spiritual giants said it is: "dangerous to put the Scriptures in the hands of people whose inner self is not yet sufficiently awakened to encounter the Spirit, because they will try to use God for their own egocentric purposes."⁸ If only the Gideons had read more of Merton! "What is hidden beneath the literal meaning [of Scripture] is not merely another and more hidden meaning, it is also a new and totally different reality... It is the divine life itself."⁹

So let us return to today's gospel paradox. How can Jesus be simultaneously the gate, the gatekeeper, and the one who leads others through the gate? It should be obvious that read literally this is both impossible – as well as pious-sounding but unintelligible nonsense, which is bound to impede the mission of the church in its efforts to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ to a post-modern, evolutionary, quantum world. If we want to communicate 'good news' it will be essential to assist people to read the Scriptures with the symbolic mind – with mystical insight.

When we do this it becomes possible to see that the 'good shepherd' is primarily an *inner truth* - who will always lead his sheep to an outer expression, to ethical action that serves those most in need.¹⁰ By divine grace – and as those made in the image and likeness of God – every person is capable of apprehending interiorly that God-given potential which is simultaneously the barrier, the capacity to open the barrier, and the wisdom, the shepherd, who is able to lead us through the barrier, to life in abundance.¹¹ Read symbolically, interiorly, we are able to recognise our inner sheep: that instinctual energy in all of us which is so readily lead astray by egocentric personas and energies; but which is also the inner voice of truth, 'street smart' enough as to recognise the 'strangers', 'thieves and bandits'.¹² Our instinctual inner sheep capacity is capable of distinguishing between the voice of the good shepherd and the 'hired hand' wolves – and making the right decision.

Moreover, we suddenly discover Jesus as that innate, God-given inner reality – that capacity for self-emptying;¹³ that capacity for self-transcendence; for what the early church fathers called 'theosis', deification, which is the Divine aim for all humankind, a unitive vision, a comprehensive communion, extending to all the 'sheep' that do not belong to 'this fold'.¹⁴

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⁸ Richard Rohr, **Yes, And...**, Cincinnati Franciscan Media, 2013, p11.

⁹ Thomas Merton, in John A Sanford, **Mystical Christianity: A Psychological Interpretation of the Gospel of John**, New York: Crossroads, 1993, p4.

¹⁰ 1 John 3:17

¹¹ John 10:10

¹² John 10:5

¹³ John 10:17-18

¹⁴ John 10:16