

**John 10<sup>1-10</sup>** (also Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2<sup>19-25</sup>)

Ballarat Cathedral

30<sup>th</sup> April 2023

**Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is despair, hope; where there is doubt, faith; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Amen**

We have just heard John's report of a talk by Jesus, in which he depicts his relationship with his followers as that of a shepherd with his sheep. It's a nice, pastoral piece, easy to listen to; a feel-good piece. John obviously thought it was important, because it takes up almost a whole chapter of his gospel. But if we want to go beyond the warm glow and understand what it is really about, we start meeting problems.

The first problem is that Jesus starts like this:

Very truly, I tell you ...

The "you" refers to the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders; this passage comes in the middle of a long confrontation with them. **We** aren't Pharisees, of course: has what Jesus said to them got any relevance to us?

Then there is a problem about sheep. Our culture doesn't rate sheep highly. When I was a student at university, I had a friend who was studying veterinary science. In one experiment, the students were directed to put about ten sheep in the middle of a large, grassy paddock; and to put an electric fence right round them. The students left the sheep there for several days, until they had eaten most of the grass, and they started to look longingly at the lovely green patches beyond the fence. Then, one night, a student was told to creep quietly up and remove the fence, without the sheep's seeing.

The students recorded the sheep's reactions. For some 24 hours, the sheep remained inside the original square, grazing on what was left of the grass. Then, suddenly, one of them apparently realised that there was no fence. It got excited, drew back, jumped over the non-existent fence wires, and headed for the lovely long grass. And, one by one, all of the others followed him, each one jumping over the fence just as he had done. Within a few minutes, they were all clustered together, eagerly eating the new-found food.

Now, doesn't that just confirm how dim-witted sheep are? I don't know if n any of you have farming experience, but the majority of us, who haven't, tend to talk about sheep only as examples of mindlessness and group-think. "Don't be like sheep," we say to our children, "Think for yourself; have the courage of your own convictions."

So, to us, for Jesus to describe his followers as sheep, it's not very flattering. We try to soften it by creating a romantic, sentimental

picture of a shepherd with his crook, tenderly caring for one beloved lamb. I'm sure you have seen this in lots of stained-glass windows and illustrated children's Bibles.

But Jesus wasn't talking about one special sheep; he refers to the flock as a whole:

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep ... the sheep listen to his voice ... his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

A further problem for us moderns is that we are not familiar with shepherds. One our way in from Gordon, Jill and I see hundreds of sheep, but never a shepherd—at most we see a farmer, three fields away, ignoring the sheep, or occasionally herding them into a shed or another field. This is typically done using a sheepdog, taking advantage of their follow-the-leader mentality.

So, is there anything in this passage that is meaningful for us today? There most certainly is.

For a start, as we eavesdrop, as it were, on Jesus' words to those ancient religious leaders, we realise what a strong and challenging point he is making. Those first listeners would have been completely familiar with shepherds—they were absolutely essential to the subsistence farming of those times. And they knew that every shepherd devoted his life, day and night, to looking after the flock. This, says Jesus, is just like my total commitment to those who follow me. The Pharisees would have been very familiar with the picture in their Scriptures of God's committed relationship to his people. It is described there as that of a loving parent to children, and occasionally as a farmer's devoted care for his animals and plants. The listeners would have been in no doubt what Jesus was claiming: he is not merely a charismatic leader who is able to inspire people to follow him. He is completely and utterly committed to them:

I am come that they might have life, and have it abundantly

There is another powerful image here, quite foreign to us, and which Jesus doesn't explicitly mention, but it would have sprung into the minds of his audience. Throughout the OT, the image of the shepherd is closely linked to that of the king. Every king was expected to relate to his people as a shepherd does to his sheep. So, in describing himself as the shepherd caring for his flock, Jesus was not only declaring his devotion to them, but also implying that he had complete authority over them.

I am the gate for the sheep. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out finding pasture.

The emphasis throughout Jesus' words is on the flock: the relationship of the members to one another and to their shepherd. We too easily think of the message of the gospel in terms of myself, the Christian individual, my relationship to Christ. Jesus is calling us to show complete commitment to one another, as members of his flock, and to him, as the shepherd-king.

What this means for how we should live is reflected in that passage from the Book of Acts:

All who believed were together, and had all things in common ... they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God.

That is the appropriate response to Jesus' message about himself as the shepherd. May we, too, know that commitment to him, and may it be reflected in our compassionate service to one another.