

Opportunity Knocks

John 10:1-11

The image of Jesus as the “Good Shepherd” is surely one of the most beloved in Church history. For many who went to Sunday School they remember a picture with a rather anaemic Jesus with sensible beard, in green pasture with a cute lamb in his arms or around his shoulder with smiling, white 1950s children all around him. Whilst we may have concerns over the artistic worth of such images it seems such a safe picture, such a comforting picture. The kind of image of Jesus that anyone can accept.

Yet when Jesus first announced that he was the Good Shepherd, some said he was demon possessed and later tried to stone him for this claim. Jesus was obviously presenting a far more contentious picture than the one presented at Sunday School. It is a statement that demands a response. As we consider Jesus’ claims to be “The Door” and “The Good Shepherd” we will see why this caused such division and some may be roused to anger like those who heard Jesus long ago but we will also see why those who do accept him find such security, contentment and peace.

I AM THE DOOR

Doors are very useful things, they allow entry to what is inside as well as providing security when inside. Yet doors can cause trouble. We have probably all had the experience of trying to pull on a door that needs to be pushed or vice versa famously captured in the Far Side Midvale School for the Gifted cartoon. We have certainly had a few people struggle with our new doors.

The Only Door: Exclusive Claim

People certainly do struggle with what Jesus says about being the door, or gate. Jesus has previously said that he is “The Light of the World”, offering true knowledge of God, and that he is “The Bread of Life”, offering eternal life which starts now. But here Jesus says that the only way to get these benefits, to come inside is through him. There is no way of ignoring this part of Jesus’ claim, for he compares himself with others try to enter by some other way and says they are thieves and robbers.

When we do go through we come to the security of being on the inside, Jesus is a security door so to speak. The Jewish shepherd used to put the sheep in a walled sheep pen for the night and he lay in the gap in the wall. He literally was the door to keep the sheep safe. There is a great focus in this passage on the safety, the eternal safety of those who come in by this door. Jesus will keep safe eternally those who enter. But if we want this security it can only be found by coming in through Jesus. Jesus is the only door.

An Open Door: The Nature of Jesus

We can start to see why Jesus’ claims caused such division, it sounds so exclusive, why aren’t there other doors? I think a better question would be: is the door open? As long as there is one open door that is all we need.

The image of a closed door is a powerful one. Our life changes direction and we speak of doors being closed. Many of us may resonate with the Ziggy cartoon where he is standing in front of a door marked “Opportunity” but the door handle has come off in



his hand. When you stand outside your locked glass office door and you can see your keys on the desk it is very depressing.

The wonderful news of the Christian gospel is that with what we know of Jesus we know that the door is open. But then we might worry about whether we will be let in.

Some of you may remember that the Casino used to have a really strict dress code, you couldn't get in without a tie. One night in my youth I was out with friends and we decided to go to the Casino but none of us had ties and we couldn't be bothered going home (I wasn't keen to explain to my parents why I needed a tie at that time of night) and it was far too late to buy some. So we improvised. We got some paper napkins and folded them to look like ties, stuck them in our shirts and tried our luck. It was a very nerve wracking exercise approaching the door, would we get it in?

We did but it is great to know that coming to Jesus is not like that. The door is open there is an open invitation to all who will hear. The issue is not can we get in, it is will we go in.

As with all the "I am" statements, this saying of Jesus invites a response. Bread has to be eaten, light has to be walked in, doors have to be entered.

What would stop someone walking through it? It seems foolish in the extreme to refuse to go through a door simply because it is the only one and we think there should be more. Rather we should accept the invitation and walk through.

I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD

But what does it mean to go through the door? As we shall see by changing the image from door to shepherd it means firstly realising something about Jesus, something about ourselves and finally what Jesus has done for us.

Realising Something About Jesus.

Firstly Jesus as he claims to be the Good Shepherd is claiming to be the leader of God's people. Unlike in Australia where the shepherd drives the sheep along, in the Middle East the shepherd leads his flock that he calls by name from the pen. For Jesus to claim to be the shepherd is a claim to be the leader.

But there is more going on behind this image. There is an echo here back to Psalm 23 where God is the shepherd of the people of God. Jesus again is making the audacious claim to have complete unity with God the Father and by so doing claiming the same authority. This is more than just a nice comforting agricultural image and it explains why the first hearers were so angry with Jesus for saying it.

To enter through the door, Jesus means realising who he is, he is the God appointed leader, he is the Lord, he deserves our loyalty, and our obedience.

Now this may seem a little radical and scary but it is worth remembering that one aspect of this shepherd is that he is the *good* shepherd. Now in this day of economic rationalism a good shepherd might be the one that makes the best return on each sheep, or the one that causes the least damage to the environment. But the word that is used here for good carries overtones of really good, or beautiful.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is to talk about a subject which is close to my heart but probably not good for my heart: pies. This is a topic on which I have done quite a bit of research in a variety of locations. If you have a pie at Banjos they are good. But if you have a pie from Richmond Bakery they are *good*. That is the kind of distinction that is being made here. Jesus is the *good* shepherd.

What is it that makes him such a shepherd. It is his care for the sheep. Jesus as he uses this image is comparing himself with other potential shepherds and is saying loud and clear that unlike them his concern is always for the wellbeing of the sheep. As we follow this shepherd we can be sure that he has our best interests at heart. We can trust this Shepherd.

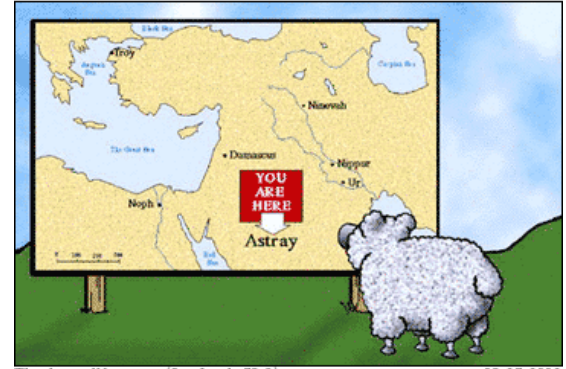
So the first thing we have to realise is that Jesus is the good shepherd with the authority of God and he loves the sheep.

Realising Something About Ourselves.

But there is a flip side of this claim by Jesus to be the shepherd. It implies that we are sheep! Now this is not a compliment to the human race, sheep are not known for their intelligence, they are stubborn, and they need a shepherd. There is no such thing as a feral sheep. I have heard of feral cats, dogs, even chickens, but never feral sheep. Without a shepherd a sheep is in grave danger, the sheep need the shepherd.

This is something we all need to recognise, we are dependant creatures. We don't like this idea, we want to be the shepherd, we want to run our own lives our own way but we keep mucking it up. It is no surprise that the Bible uses sheep for an image of the mess that humanity makes of things "We all like sheep have gone astray, each to his own way." That is what we do, we go astray. The Bible calls this sin, and we all do it, we don't live the way that God tells us and how Jesus our shepherd shows us. Such behaviour puts us sheep in deadly peril.

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Realising What Jesus Has Done for Us.

This leads us finally to realising what Jesus has done for us.

You see there is something very odd in this saying about Jesus being the Good Shepherd. He says that he lays down his life for the sheep. Now this is such a well known phrase, beloved of Christian devotion that I think it means to miss how that this is really weird. A good shepherd should surely stay alive for the sheep, not die, a dead shepherd is not much use to sheep. Notice that Jesus does not say that he is willing to die, but that he will, dying is the plan.

This can only mean that the sheep are in truly grave danger and that the only way to save them is for the shepherd to die. What is going on? The deadly danger to the sheep is sin and death, the natural consequence of sin. Jesus has come to deal with these dangers ironically by the shepherd becoming a sheep. When John the Baptist sees Jesus at the beginning of John's Gospel he declared "behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Whilst we all like sheep may have gone astray, he was punished for our transgressions like a lamb to the slaughter (see Isaiah 53:4-9). Jesus takes our place.

Jesus' death was not a heroic failure, a noble gesture it was God's age long plan of dealing with sin, the sin of us all, the sin of the world, the sin of you and me. The more we understand this the more we understand the amazing love of God and how good is this Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

In the resurrection of Jesus we can see that the twin enemies of the sheep, sin and death, have been triumphed over. Whilst the shepherd may have been dead he is now back leading the flock and calling others to join and follow him as their Good Shepherd. And by triumphing over death we can face this life in hope and confidence that though we will at times walk through the valley of death we follow a shepherd who will lead us into the next life.

CONCLUSION: HEARING THE VOICE OF THE SHEPHERD

So that is how we take up the offer of Christianity we go through the door Jesus. It means to accept who Jesus is, that he is the Lord, the King, the great good shepherd who has the authority of God and so the right to direct us. It also means recognising our dependence on God and that not only is Jesus our leading shepherd, he is our saving shepherd who became a lamb, who loved us enough to die for us.

Now there is much in this that some people may want to reject. "No one is going to tell me what to do, I refuse to think of myself as a wayward sheep, this is all crazy

talk.” And certainly that is how some responded to Jesus, they called him demon possessed and even wanted to stone him for claiming to be God.

But others may hear the call of Jesus. There is great focus in this passage on hearing the voice of the shepherd, his call to join his flock. If you hear that call don't delay, respond and be a found sheep and enter into salvation following the good shepherd.

For those who are already part of Jesus' flock let us always be grateful for all that our Shepherd has done for us and stay close to him so that we may hear his voice call our names in love.

Lord Jesus, door to salvation, great shepherd of the sheep, may we hear your voice: call our names so that we may enter into eternal life.