

**Pastor Graham Pfeffer Message for 4th Sunday of Easter/Good Shepherd
Sunday 30th April 2023**

Text John10:1-10

⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, 'Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

Jesus says, I am the gate. So, what does he mean by that? We know that a gate is the entrance to a house yard, or a paddock etc. When a farmer, opens the gate to a paddock and calls to his herd of cattle, or flock of sheep, the animals know this is an invitation to enter the paddock and eat.

I experienced this on my sister's place who with her family run a dairy farm. Once milking is done in the morning, my brother-in-law, rides before the herd, calling them to follow him to the paddock for the day, and opens the gate for them. The gate and the farmer are essential for the wellbeing of the cattle. If the cattle get into the paddock any other way, then they are acting as thieves as the gospel reading alludes too.

Jesus says he is both the gate and the shepherd for the wellbeing of the sheep. John 10 begins with, very truly, I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.

So, what is Jesus on about?

Firstly, what is this gate Jesus is referring to? The image Jesus is using is the gate to sheepfolds or pens. There were two kinds of sheep pens. One kind was a public sheepfold in the cities and villages, large enough to hold several flocks of sheep. This sheep pen had a gatekeeper, whose duty was to guard the gate of the sheep pen during the night and let the shepherds of the sheep into their sheep in the morning. The shepherds would then call their sheep and lead them out to pasture.

The second kind of sheep pen was in the countryside, if shepherds were too far from the village. This sheep pen was a rough circle of rocks piled to make a wall with a small open space to enter. Through it the shepherd would lead the sheep. Since there was no gate, the shepherd would lie across the opening to keep the sheep in, and the wild animals out. The shepherd is the gate.

In the same way, Jesus says he is the gate and the shepherd of the sheep. Good shepherds are providers, guides, protectors, and constant companions of sheep. Such is the bond between shepherd and sheep, that shepherds were able to separate their flock from another flock simply by calling to their sheep.

The context of today's reading follows on from the healing of the blind man in chapter 9 where Jesus heals a man born blind on the Sabbath. The man was taken to the Pharisees, who investigated the healing, but refused to acknowledge Jesus as the healer; rather, they mocked the healed man for trusting Jesus and threw him out of the synagogue.

When Jesus heard what happened, He went to the previously blind man, revealed Himself as the Son of Man, and the healed blind man worshipped him.

The Pharisees, however, are more concerned about publicly upholding laws and guarding their power and authority than about the well-being of the man.

Let's recall the conversation that leads into today's reading. From John 9:39, ³⁹ Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." ⁴⁰ Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?" ⁴¹ Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. Jesus then continues in chapter 10 with, Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.

The word for thief, is also translated the one who steals, which also refers to false teachers, in other words, false shepherds. Anyone who claims a way of salvation other than Jesus, robs the people of truth. Just as a thief climbs over the wall of the sheep pen bypassing the gate, false teachers attempt to bypass Jesus as the way the truth and the life.

Jesus speaks against the Pharisees, who push manmade requirements on people for salvation. Jesus referred to them as false teachers, as false shepherds who fail to let others see the true means of salvation. The result of such thievery is death and destruction, as Jesus said, the thief comes to kill and destroy.

The Pharisees would say, they upheld the law and the prophets. But Jesus says, in John 5:39, *You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me.*

To Jesus, the Law and the Prophets did not offer another way of salvation but pointed forward to him as the one way of salvation. Therefore, Jesus says in John 10:7-9, *"Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture.*

Jesus teaches the gate as a place of coming and going. The pharisees prevented the man from coming and going but threw him out of the synagogue. Therefore, Jesus says to the Pharisees, the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

So, what is this life that Jesus gives to the full? Life to the full is not about an abundance of material possessions. Jesus assures us that we need not worry about what we will eat or wear. Life to the full has in mind eternal life. Yet eternal life is not just about life after death. It is life that begins here and now in knowing the one God has sent. It is knowing the voice of the good shepherd who truly cares for us. It is about life under the watchful eye of our good shepherd, finding security through faith in him, and nourishment in his word and sacrament as part of his flock. It is to have life where we find our meaning and value in Christ, which endures even beyond death. It is to know the gate and the shepherd are one and the same looking out for your wellbeing.

Psalm 121 is a Psalm for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem. We are also pilgrims on a journey of eternal life. Psalm 121:1-2 I look up to the mountains, does my help come from there? ² My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth! 5-8 The LORD himself watches over you! The LORD stands beside you as your protective shade. ⁶ The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon at night. ⁷ The LORD keeps you from all harm and watches over your life. ⁸ The LORD keeps watch over you as you come and go, both now and forever.

Sounds very much like the lord as our shepherd and gate doesn't it. I pray you find rest and abundant life in his presence. Amen