

Jesus: shepherd and gate

John 10: 1-15 talks

Talk one: vv. 1-8 (Lesley Newbiggin's own translation)

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber; but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." This figure Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who come before me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not heed them."

> It was like a mantra at school; 'do not mix your metaphors!'

> Well, the Gospel writer, John, clearly didn't get the same advice as this John. The way that chapter 10 is written is a glorious jumble of different images all mixed in together.

> One commentary I looked at suggested that it may be that what we read is condensed from a much longer piece of teaching by Jesus. Which is an explanation as to why it seems so muddled.

> It seems clear to begin with that Jesus is likening himself to a shepherd – a familiar idea of the time that I'll come back to in a moment, but then he says he is the gate – how is that possible?

> Then there is a lot of coming and going. It's enough to confuse anyone! It certainly confused Jesus' original audience, so we shouldn't feel so bad if we don't 'get it' first time.

> I'd like to share briefly how I have made sense of it with the help of some Bible commentaries.

> We begin with the shepherd image.

> As with so much in the Gospels there is an Old Testament background to this image. Shepherd of the people was a role for the leader of God's people – the King. This is especially clear when you think of the greatest King of Israel, David, who started out as a shepherd boy.

> With this in mind, let's turn to of one of the famous prophecies that is read at Christmas about the coming of a new ruler – from Bethlehem (King David's birth place) as it contains a shepherd reference:

“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.

⁴ And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;

⁵ and he shall be the one of peace.”

> So far so good Jesus as shepherd is important and easy to grasp – but what about the idea of Jesus calling himself a gate?

> Teresa, Wayne and Greg have been trying to sort that particular muddle out for the call to worship, as the metaphor of Jesus as a gate just doesn't work in sign language – and it's no clearer in print to be honest!

> Interestingly, the key to unlocking confusing image is Psalm 118 again which cropped up last week and on Palm Sunday.

> Psalm 118:19-20 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.

²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.

> The themes to note are that this is a processional song for worshippers approaching the great temple in Jerusalem which was regarded as God's dwelling place on earth. Later on in the song there is a call and response to those who open the gates.

> Psalm 68 is similar to 118 in that it describes a procession to the temple:

²⁴ Your solemn processions are seen, O God,
the processions of my God, my King, into the sanctuary—

²⁵ the singers in front, the musicians last,
between them girls playing tambourines:

> We read of God, represented in the presence of the King who joins the procession into the sanctuary. Now think of Jesus.

> It's as if this presence of God embodied in the anointed King travelling with the people is actually embodies the way into God's presence.

Which is why Jesus used the metaphor of himself as the door or gate, because He was saying that He is the way, the only way into God's presence.

> Jesus both guides God's people and is the only way to gain entry into God's presence.

> Anyone else claiming to do so is acting under false pretences.

> We'll reflect on how this applies to us in our circumstances after hearing some more of John chapter 10.

Talk two: vv. 9-15

> The second part of our reading from John 10 turns our attention to leadership.

> Jesus makes the comparison clear using the sheep and shepherd metaphor. There is the shepherd who cares so much he is willing to give up his life to enable the sheep to live.

> There is also the image that the only way into the pen of the sheep is to enter by the gate that is belief in Jesus.

> Those who don't enter by the gate but who have climbed up and in by their own means only do so with the intention of exploiting the sheep for their own gains.

> Clearly, the original aim of Jesus' words were a warning against those in power in the temple who had gone so badly wrong.

> But how about now? Well, it really doesn't take too much effort to compare those in leadership in all sorts of areas of life, especially in the cut and thrust of industry and commerce, who lead, and seek promotion, with their own gain uppermost in mind and care little about how they exploit other people as a means to their end or as mere units of production.

> What a contrast to the model of leadership that Jesus gives as one who gives all for the benefit of those He loves.

> There are hugely important themes here about God's principles of justice and equality of humanity to be considered, but that's not the direction I am taking today.

> Instead I'd like to look briefly at another theme to emerge from the John reading - and that is safety. The safe haven of the sheepfold under the protection of the shepherd.

> One of the other Bible readings set for today also echoes this theme. Psalm 23, that we have just sung, is another one of the sheep/shepherd metaphors and the overarching theme of the Psalm is how God takes care of us and keeps us safe.

> Staying safe is also a major theme to have come to the fore during this time of lockdown. How many times each day do we get told "Stay safe, stay indoors". Its good advice, but it does wear thin after a while – or is it just me getting grumpy?

> But it not just the government who send such messages. I have been keeping an account of how many occasions in the last few days the idea of 'keeping safe' has cropped up in various different ways.

> There are the frequent reminders from the virus protection programme on my computer – and a dire warning that someone had been trying to hack into Pauline's. If you use any internet device you really need these safety systems.

> There was a message from Amazon about keeping their delivery people safe. There is lots of debate on the news about wearing face masks to keep safe. For light relief Pauline and I have been re-watching a TV series "Spooks" – a drama about some MI5 agents – and one episode featured sophisticated house alarms and other protection measures and 'safe houses'. Several times this week military jets have been thundering overhead – a reminder of our defence forces – keeping us safe. And so it goes on.....

> There are all sorts of ways to stay safe – but the text from John's Gospel reminds us of how Jesus can keep us safe in a different way. I would argue it's the most important safety aspect of them all as it's about **life** – life everlasting.

> As Jesus himself says: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (NRSV) or "I have come in order that you might have life—life in all its fullness." (Good News) or "I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of." (The Message).

> That is what love does – that is what Jesus wants for us – the best life possible and He gave up His life to make it possible and that is the message of Easter.

> Which bring us to consider how we make use of that gift that cost Jesus so much. This time of lockdown can enable us to reconsider and review how we live our lives under the gift and protection of our Saviour.

> For that is what the passage from John also talks about – the going out and coming in – the entering the sheepfold through/with Jesus acting as the gate – he is the only way into God's presence. And then, as we listen to the voice of the great shepherd, we can be led out once again guided out in life by Jesus – and that life will be life in all its fullness.

> Jesus does not promise that there won't be dangers, difficulties or attacks – what he does promise is that he will never, ever leave us or abandon us.

> What an astonishing gift Jesus has offered to you and to me – life in all its fullness, a better life than we could have dreamed of – life everlasting.

> Even if you are feeling rather stuck being indoors and out of touch with friends and family, the image of being inside the sheepfold may have lost its appeal just now – but please remember its only metaphor – and lets all do the best we can to thrive on the life that Jesus gives us wherever we are.

Amen