

### ***Smart Sheep***

In the name of him who is the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls, dear friends in Christ: Today we revisit one of the most cherished themes that the Scriptures give to describe our relationship to Jesus the Savior. It's that of the Good Shepherd. And I think part of what makes it such a powerful theme is the way it sets before us such a clear mental picture. You really can see it: the shepherd leading his sheep who are totally dependent upon him. Bring in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which is just about everybody's favorite, and it completes the picture: he leads *me* to green pastures and quiet waters. He protects *me* from all harm and danger. Forget the lions, tigers, and bears (Oh my!); even in the valley of death's shadow, I've got nothing to fear. With his rod and staff he'll overcome every threat. I get it: Jesus is my Shepherd, therefore I will lack nothing. He's got it all under control. I can trust him completely. It's beautiful.

But as beautiful as it is, that's not what I want to talk about today. Why? It's because my text is today's Gospel; and in case you didn't notice, in the course of that reading Jesus doesn't call himself a Shepherd at all, good or otherwise. No, he uses a different image entirely. In this text Jesus calls himself the *door* or (we could translate it) the *gate* for the sheep. He's referring to the gate of the community sheep pen that was a standard feature in the villages of Judea and Galilee. It's where the whole town's sheep were kept at night to keep them from wandering off or being taken by wolves or other predators. Jesus says he's the gate through which the legitimate shepherd enters and through which the sheep also pass as they go in and go out led by their shepherd. So, even though it's Good Shepherd Sunday, let's set aside that picture for now, and concentrate more on this idea that Jesus is the door.

It's an image that's a little less familiar. To be sure, as I've said before, one of my goals each Sunday is to select a hymn that proclaims the same message that I'm about to deliver. I want you to sing the sermon before I preach it. But guess what: there are dozens of hymns that speak of Jesus the Shepherd. There are others that cast him as the Light, the Life, the Way, or any number of other biblical metaphors. But I couldn't find a one that mentioned Jesus the door. So, if you are gifted in writing hymn lyrics, this could be your chance to stand out.

But what does Jesus mean when he calls himself the door of the sheep? That's the real question. And to help us understand, we'll have to look at the context in which Jesus makes this statement. These words come in the aftermath of the account of Jesus giving sight to a man who had been born blind. We had that as the Gospel lesson several weeks back when it was still Lent. Let me refresh your memory. Jesus was in the Temple with his disciples. He was in a heated debate with the religious leaders there. In the course of the discussion, Jesus claimed to be God. Those hearing him were so upset by his words that they picked up rocks to stone him on the spot; but Jesus just walked away with his disciples in tow.

As they were leaving the Temple courts, right outside the gate, they saw the man who had been born blind sitting there begging. You had the impression this was his usual place – right *outside the gate*. That's important. But seeing the man, it reminded the disciples of a nagging question: Who sinned that this man was born blind? Was it him? Or was it his parents? It was a theological conundrum that perplexed many. And there were no good answers. What could the man have done while still in the womb that was so terrible that it warranted such a harsh punishment? On the other hand, if his parents were the guilty ones,

why would the Lord inflict the penalty on their son? It seemed the Lord wasn't being fair to somebody; but who? So the disciples present the question to Jesus.

In answer, Jesus tells his disciples that their initial assumption is wrong. You think you see what is going on here, but you don't. You think the man's blindness is a punishment for sin. That's not what it is. He was born blind that the works of God might be displayed in him. And the thing to see is that the answer of Jesus operates on several levels. At first brush, because of the man's disability, he is dependent upon others. He lives on people's kindness and charity. So, every time someone gives him money or food, or assists him in some other way, we see the work of God being done for him through the hands of his people. On a second level, the work of God is displayed in him when Jesus gives him his sight. He puts mud in the man's eyes and tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. When the man does, instantly he can see. And that does indeed display God's miraculous power; and not only on the man, it's also an eye opener for the disciples. The man is given physical sight, yes; but by explaining what's really going on to his disciples, they are given spiritual sight to see things as they are.

Finally, the work of God is displayed when the man who can now see runs afoul of the Temple authorities. They demand to know of him how he gained his sight. He explains what Jesus did and said, and how when he washed he could see. The leaders hated to hear this. This man was giving credit to the notorious blasphemer they had just tried to stone. But it also threw them into confusion. Some said the miracle was obviously God's doing, they couldn't deny it; so Jesus must be on God's side in some way (though they couldn't understand how). Others said impossible: this Jesus is a heretic; and besides, the man was healed on the Sabbath day. No true man of God would do the work of healing on the day of rest. It's a flagrant violation. They couldn't figure it out. So they asked the man what he thought. He said Jesus is clearly a prophet of God. How else could he have done this great miracle?

That infuriated them. They replied, "What do you know? We are brilliant religious scholars! And you, you were born steeped in sin!" It's pretty clear why they thought the man had been born blind. It was his fault. He was a wretched sinner. He had no place here among the righteous. And so they threw him out of the Temple – that is, they excommunicated him. He was prohibited from ever entering its sacred courts again.

It's afterward, when the man finds himself a religious outcast that Jesus comes to him. He asks the man, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He replies, "Who is he, that I may believe in him?" Jesus answers, "The one who is speaking to you and whom you see standing before you is he." And the man says, "I do, Lord. I believe." *And this* is the greatest work of God displayed in the man: that he is brought to faith in Jesus.

Now, it happens that there were some Pharisees nearby who overheard the conversation between Jesus and this man who had been blind. They were incensed by what they heard. And Jesus tells them that they are blind. He tells them that it is precisely because they believe that they can see that they are blind – blind to the truth.

It's immediately after this that Jesus begins to speak the words of today's Gospel – about supposed shepherds who don't go through the door, but gain access to the sheep in other ways, like climbing over the wall. These aren't shepherds at all, Jesus says. They are thieves and robbers who are bent on destroying the sheep. A true shepherd, he continues, goes through the door. He is recognized by the gatekeeper, who lets him in. And the sheep recognize their shepherd's voice. They follow him out. But they won't follow imposters. The sheep flee from them because they don't know their voices.

What Jesus is describing is typical sheep behavior that's been documented many times. Here in the new world and in Australia those who keep sheep usually drive them from place to place, often with trained dogs; but in the old world and especially in Jesus' time, sheep were led. They became acquainted with one particular shepherd and pretty much attach themselves to him. They trusted him and followed him wherever he went. So even though all of the town's sheep would be kept together in a single pen, there was no need to brand or mark them to identify to whom they belonged. The sheep knew which shepherd was theirs. In the morning when it was time to take the sheep out to pasture, the various shepherds would come to the gate, step inside so the sheep could see who it was, and they'd call for their own sheep to follow. The sheep would sort themselves out and follow their own shepherd out the door.

So with all this background in mind, it becomes clear what Jesus is talking about. We know the sheep represent people, and specifically the people of God. The shepherds are those who are appointed to care for them on God's behalf. And Jesus is here saying that the present shepherds are in fact thieves and robbers. They are abusing the sheep. And this formerly blind man is the case in point. When he was blind, he had been excluded. The religious leaders judged him a filthy sinner who was getting his just deserts. He sat outside the gate of the Temple and begged not only because it was a prime place to encounter people who might show charity; but also because he was not welcome to come inside: no one as sinful as him was allowed in the Temple.

And that's strange if you think about it. I mean, what was the Temple for if not to dispense God's grace and mercy to sinners? It was where sins were to be confessed. It was where sacrifices were to be offered to atone for sin. It was where God's life-giving word of forgiveness was to be proclaimed. And those things were precisely what was not happening – at least, not happening as they should. Everything had been perverted. The Temple and its purpose had been hijacked. Some like the high priest and his cronies had turned the Temple into a money making operation. It was a place to fleece the faithful by overcharging them for “guaranteed priest-approved” sacrificial animals. Others like the Pharisees and Scribes had made the Temple a place where good, holy, righteous people gathered to be close to God and discuss ways in which they could strive to please him even more by their own efforts. And between the two sides, they were destroying people's faith in the genuine truths of God and robbing people of their souls.

Again this is evidenced in the story of the man who had been blind. Now he could see. Obviously God had performed a great miracle for him. And from the perspective of the religious leaders, this should have been interpreted as a sign that God's curse on him had been lifted. Now he should be welcome in the Temple – and indeed, they did bring him in briefly to interrogate him; but then they threw him out. Why? Because he confessed the truth about Jesus. But now, having been tossed outside the gate he thinks he's worse off than before. Yes, I can see; but I'm totally cut off from God. I'm doomed. I've lost my soul. It's from this pit of despair that Jesus rescues the man when he comes and reveals himself to him. Then he discovers the whole truth about Jesus and confesses his total trust in him.

In today's Gospel Jesus is telling him not to worry. Yes, you've been thrown out that gate by a bunch of thieves and robbers; but I am the true gate. The way to God's grace and forgiveness is through me. And all true shepherds of God's people also come through me. They lead the sheep in and out always through me. And really, everything about the Temple was meant to point to Christ. He's the true sacrifice for sin – the only truly perfect lamb without spot or blemish. All the others merely foreshadowed him. In him alone is the declaration of God's forgiveness. In him alone can one stand before God in total righteousness. This man

thought he needed to go through the gate of the Temple to get to God. But now he learned that having come through Jesus, having trusted in him, and now having recognized his voice, he was already inside the much greater Temple: the Church of Jesus Christ, the assembly of those saved by grace through faith in him.

But now making the leap to apply this teaching of Jesus as the door to us in our day, we see that it has to do with legitimate access. Who should be dealing with God's sheep? Answer: only those who come through Jesus. They must come in his name. They must come in his authority. And they must come speaking his words – and specifically his words of grace and forgiveness in view of his sacrifice for sin. These are true shepherds. And through them the sheep of God hear a voice they recognize. It's the voice of Jesus. Anyone who tries to get to the sheep in any other way – not going through Jesus – is a thief and a robber. He's not come to help the sheep, but rather to help himself to the sheep.

So let me suggest that today's Gospel is calling upon all of us to be smart sheep. And I know that sounds like an oxymoron, because sheep aren't known for being particularly bright animals. Quite the contrary: on the whole they have the reputation for being rather stupid. Without someone to guide them, they don't do well finding food and water for themselves. And besides that, they're pretty much defenseless on their own. When predators come around, they can't fight nor can they run very fast. They're as good as sitting ducks.

Ah, but what makes a sheep smart is knowing that. It's knowing that I am weak and defenseless and that I cannot take care of myself. It's knowing that I need a shepherd to lead me, to see that I am fed, and to defend me from the wolves and other hazards that are out there. I need a shepherd I can trust. Who's that? It's a shepherd who comes through Jesus. It's a shepherd through whom when he speaks, I can recognize the voice of Jesus.

Listen: you the sheep of God's flock are called upon to judge your shepherd – whether that's me, as your pastor, or anyone one else who may serve you in the ministry. You are to exercise discernment. And you are not to allow yourself to be fooled by imposters. Sheep never are; but the same is not true for people. In that sense, we're not as smart as sheep. And what I mean is this: a whole lot of what goes on under the name of the Christian Church has nothing to do with Christ or his Gospel. Sometimes teachers refuse to talk about sin because they fear that will upset someone. And of course if there's no sin, there's no need to mention things like Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection. Other times the church becomes primarily an agency for social ministry, helping the poor and providing assistance to the needy. Or it becomes more of a holiness club in which people are told they're basically good and just need a few pointers now and then to really shine – more of a gathering place for the nearly perfect than a hospital for the spiritually sick, weak, wounded, and dying.

We let ourselves be deceived by things like a teacher's natural charisma, his friendliness, his good intentions, his gift for speaking, or his sincerity – none of which matters one bit in the end if he's not delivering Jesus Christ and him crucified. The men who threw out the formerly blind man had good intentions. All of them were well trained and erudite speakers. All of them were sincere. But they were sincerely wrong. And they were leading people to damnation. You are called to be a smart sheep; one who demands to hear from your shepherd the voice of the Lord, and who will consistently lead you through Jesus the door – the door to God's grace and forgiveness, and to abundant and eternal life. May God our Father make us all such smart sheep. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***