

**Third Sunday after Easter  
15 May 2011**

**John 10: 1-10**

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To most of us, sheep are animals seen from a distance when we drive at speed through the countryside. We know that they produce wool and are good to eat. So our mental images of sheep are more about commodities and a good meal and silly animals who follow one another for no reason and are easily led astray. Or for teasing Australians and New Zealanders...

And the modern farmer possibly knows some of his or her sheep individually but the concept of having names for each one and the picture of the shepherd leading the sheep out to pasture for the day is not one we are familiar with.

Jesus uses sheep imagery in our reading and because we have heard it often enough it has become a romantic story about sheep and their shepherd in another time and culture.

However we could well be missing the impact he was having when his hearers listened for the first time because we just don't have this sort of knowledge about sheep and shepherds.

A story is told of people living on the edge of the Sahara Desert in Niger, in a culture which still relates to animals in much the same way as in the time of Jesus:

"One day I watched two shepherds coming towards each other on the road outside our house. They were followed by their flocks of sheep and goats which look exactly the same except that the sheep tails go down and the goats go up.

As the shepherds came together so did their flocks. They stood talking for about 10 minutes while their flocks merged and milled around them. When the shepherds headed off in opposite directions, they called them. It was quite astounding to watch these animals respond to the voice of their shepherd and follow the one they knew and trusted.

These animals were treated much like children and each one had a name. The sheep knew the voice of the shepherd instinctively and absolutely trusted him. They spent all day together, and were tied up at night and at times it was really challenging to find food and clean water. They could tell a stranger when one came along.

Even if I took on the traditional clothing including the typical head cover for protection from the hot Sahara sun, the sheep would not be fooled. Admittedly I may not have deliberately caused them any harm but I didn't know them or enough about the ways of the culture and land and the bottom line was I really didn't care about them. I certainly wouldn't have given a minute's consideration to suffering for their sake let alone risking my life."

The people to whom Jesus told this sheep parable knew all about this, but even they were having trouble getting the point he was making so he pushed the metaphors and talked about being the shepherd AND being the gate. It is unfortunate that we have a new chapter-number for this story because it is really a continuation of the same situation that was going on in the chapter before (elaborate).

Jesus had healed the man born blind on the Sabbath; that had caused fury amongst the Pharisees. They were disputing Jesus' claims about coming from God and being a prophet because He did not keep the Sabbath (according to their strict view of doing no work – but this was aside from the spirit of the law – elaborate). The man born blind had been hauled before the Pharisees and after being interrogated he was excommunicated. They then turned on his parents and proceeded to intimidate them.

The Pharisees had the power to excommunicate the parents from the synagogue if they confessed that Jesus was from God. This is not like being told “you can't come to our church anymore,” which could be devastating enough. But this was their community, their social network, their identity, and as far as they understood matters, it was their only connection with God; it was literally their whole world. They would become outcasts and rejects and they were powerless against this sort of leadership.

So as a result, they had distanced themselves from their own son, their son who was born blind but now could see, which must have been painful enough in itself, for if it was my child I would want to have a party for such a miracle and invite the miracle worker as guest of honour. But fear of the leadership paralysed them and instead of celebrating it caused painful separation between them and their son. It must have created confusion and guilt within them, and they didn't have the courage to oppose this intimidation for fear of the consequences.

Jesus is angry, because people are being intimidated and this sheep story is directed at the Pharisees. By the time he has finished telling it the place is in an uproar, with division over Jesus and his teaching. This is not a romantic sheep story. This is a dangerous story; it is about confrontation against the “shepherds”, those with the task of caring for the sheep, about who was the “true shepherd”.

*[Refer to OT passage for today – preached on before but with same theme: 34: 7-25]*

The Pharisees realised that Jesus was challenging them. They had inherited a tradition, long honoured in Israel, of being the shepherds caring for the sheep – for the people. It is a term that apparently goes far back in use as a metaphor for rulers, even to the time of the Pharaohs. In the time of King David, about 1,000 years before the time of Christ, he was labelled “the shepherd king”.

Jesus is making a statement that he is the long promised messianic shepherd of hope, in the direct line of King David. Unlike the present leadership he cares not for keeping rules and regulations that lay heavy burdens on people. He doesn't come and break the law, but he comes to fulfil it. His voice booms out fearlessly “I am the Good Shepherd; I know my own sheep and my own sheep know me. In the same way, the Father knows me and I know the Father. I put the sheep before myself, and I lay down my life for the sheep. The thief only comes to steal, and kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life – yes, and have it full to overflowing.”

What are some of the implications of this for you and me? I'm sure that Jesus not only knows our name, but also knows who we are and who we are meant to be. Learning this and taking this in, is like discovering our real life, a life that is full of purpose and meaning and significance in friendship with Jesus. It is a life that is real and rich, so that it becomes the most abundant and precious experience you could only dream about - this is not experienced by knowing a lot about God or being a near-perfect person; it is about love and closeness with God, and about knowing God in the depths of our souls and minds.

There is also much that can keep us from hearing his voice. It could be guilt laid on us by others, or even laid on us by ourselves, for instance telling ourselves that if we were a better Christian then God would bless us. The Pharisees used that argument when they told the healed blind man that God doesn't listen to sinners but only to the devout and godly person who does his will – which, or course, they thought applied only to themselves and those aligned with them or under their control.

Jesus has come to release us from that kind of guilt, and from being under that kind of control by others, and from anyone who claims to have power and control over us that hurts or harms us, or keeps us from being what God has called us to be. The Pharisees honestly thought they were righteous and were doing God's will. But they were the blind ones who couldn't see who Jesus was. Nor could they hear his voice.

A writer, David Benner [*Surrender to Love* - Intervarsity Press: Illinois: 2003], has said:

“God doesn't come to control us but to love us. God's love has nothing to do with my behaviour. Responsible behaviour does not increase the Father's love, nor does irresponsible behaviour decrease it. Love is our source and love is to be our fulfilment. The Christian God wants the intimacy of our friendship not our fear. He loves sinners, redeems failures, delights in second chances and fresh starts and never tires of pursuing lost sheep or rescuing those damaged by life on the sides of its paths.”

Trust this shepherd, he knows you and knows your name. Listen for his voice and stay close to him.

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***Piece below, used after communion***

**how will we know your voice?**

**John 10: 1-10**

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how will we know your voice?  
amidst the din of a thousand others  
drumming their noise into our ears  
jumping fences, crashing parties  
sneaking in when the gate's ajar  
*here; just try this, it's what you need,*  
*with this, success is guaranteed ...*  
and then leaving us, fox-quick  
hungrier than before  
somehow sold-out, depleted  
flattened, fleeced and cheated,

how will we know your voice?

it holds the breath of all beginnings  
fills the cup with love outpouring  
binds the broken, finds the lost  
feeds the hungry, pays the cost  
a still, small voice that dampens storms  
ageless and timeless, since life's dawn,  
your tone the same

you are the one  
who speaks our name

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