

**'The Good Shepherd who is also the gate to the sheepfold'**

This is one of the 'I AM' stories of Jesus. It isn't an easy one for his hearers – it seems to be full of mixed metaphors and understandably the audience are a tad confused. Confused but seriously challenged: 'Who IS this itinerant healer and preacher, making these extraordinary claims?'

There are a couple of thoughts that will help us. Firstly, that this comes in a section starting in chapter nine where John uses a form of recording Jesus by healing someone, then allowing for a time of dialogue with others and then finally an explanation. Here we had a healing of a man born blind, then Jesus has a long dialogue with the Pharisees and others, and then comes his parables to explain his actions. So it makes sense best if we read from 9:1-10:21. But today there is another helpful bit of information that we can ponder.

'The Greek and Roman political tradition presents kings and emperors as "good shepherds" who foster a life marked by security and abundance for the empire's subjects. Throughout his story, John presents Jesus as an opponent to imperial rule, so much so that he is killed for his opposition to Caesar (John 19:12, 15).' God bless the anthropologists who dig into the culture and history of the time!

The thing is, that particularly the Romans proclaimed themselves as good providers and protectors when in fact they really weren't. Apparently 80% of the people in the empire were struggling without food security – let alone a safe home or protection from bandits etc.

This brings home the image of Jesus saying he is the Good Shepherd very well. It isn't just an easy cultural metaphor but a critique of the current political authorities. No wonder Jesus wound up the Roman leaders and thrilled the ordinary people. It needs an exceptional leader to truly understand where the ordinary people are at, then truly understand the challenges they face. That can only be done if the leader spends time with them, listens, observes and serves accordingly.

Jesus makes the point that neither the sheep, nor us, will follow a stranger; the Romans were strangers. It would appear that the religious leaders were also detached from and blind to the needs of the people. Jesus spoke the words of Scripture, albeit with a challenging new spin, there was integrity in this teacher that walked alongside the needy people.

Sheep only follow the voice of their trusted Shepherd. Do we know that voice? Clearly the hearers at the time weren't sure. And clearly there are many today who are not sure, and many more who are not even listening.

Jesus is saying he is also the gate. 'no-one comes to the father except through me' he said. (John 14:6). If we are honest we do not know exactly how that is effected. Perhaps it is information we do not need to know at this stage. We are given guidance, especially through the stories of the early church in the book of Acts, about how we are to draw near. But there is no doubt that Jesus is saying, not only is he the one who cares for us, he is also the *only way* through to salvation – to freedom and forgiveness into the Kingdom of God and eternal life.

The thief, the one who takes what is not his – in that context the political and religious leaders posing as carers. In the light of the following verse this is also likely a reference to Judas, because Jesus then says, 'The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep'. In complete contrast to the selfishness of the thief who *takes*, Jesus the good shepherd *gives* his very life for the sheep.

Salvation for the blind man was represented by light and clarity – but also social inclusion, he would no longer be on the margins, lonely and debarred from community. All effected by this 'Good Shepherd' Jesus. What, I wonder would salvation be represented by in our friends and families, our neighbours and work colleagues? Hope for the despairing, community for the lonely, purpose for the underemployed, a sense of self-worth by the down-trodden. Jesus was offering in this explanation a security and provision that the 'sheep' did not have. It is not so different now is it? It may not be that physical changes are particularly obvious – there is still poverty in the churches. But how wonderful to be *in* Christ, to be part of his body, loved, included, forgiven. And to have a hope beyond this physical life, a life beyond the death that we are painfully and exaggeratedly surrounded with at present.

Jesus *takes* nothing, he *gives* everything. Such love impels us to give our all, which through the body of Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit, is generously, freely and non-judgementally then available for the blessing of all. The Shepherd's earliest and most consistent command was and still is 'follow me'.

Amen.

*Rev Anna Griffiths*