

**Easter 4**  
**13/04/2008**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Acts 2:42 - 47**  
**Psalm 23**  
**1 Peter 2:19 - 25**  
**John 10:1 - 10**

### **I am the gate: leadership in time of conflict**

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Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Even though it is the subject of one of our windows, it is a long time since such homely imagery was part of our lifestyle. Yet many powerful assumptions linger in the background as we consider this theme.

The Good Shepherd may seem a sentimental soft option, but the context of John 10 suggests otherwise. Chapter 9 is devoted entirely to the story of how Jesus restored the sight of a man born blind, who was regarded as a victim of unforgivable sin. Jesus' action of bringing sight and faith to the man provoked a vigorous argument with the religious leaders who believed he had done something sinful or even blasphemous. They took their revenge on the man born blind and his family, and their antagonism to Jesus grew.

This is the context of Chapter 10 with its teaching on the difference between true shepherds who nurture and care for the flock, and thieves who break in to steal and kill. As the Chapter continues Jesus presses harder on the image of the Good Shepherd, and the religious leaders take up stones to kill him, and begin to plot his death. For Jesus, shepherding turned out to be a dangerous business, and it is clear in these texts, and in the letters of John, that as the church emerged from Judaism it suffered leadership rivalries. These tensions may have been experienced in the church itself, which makes it significant that John's image of Jesus at prayer in Chapter 17 is focussed on unity. The words he voiced: "that they may be one" have been formative for the Ecumenical movement, and are some of the words that called the Uniting Church into life.

In a situation of stress, rivalry and the call for unity, the question of which light you follow, which voice you listen to, and which gate you enter by has elevated significance.

In Matthew Jesus refers to the difficulty of finding the "narrow gate" that leads to life. And in John he pictures himself as the gate of the sheepfold. In this parable a material thing becomes something relational. In saying he is the gate, Jesus makes the relationship between himself and God the key, which opens the door to the Kingdom of Heaven. That key has the shape of a cross, and his voice speaks the language of self-giving, life empowering love. But it is clear there were those who believed the door was to be found in another place. They wanted no part of God's offer of abundant life to all. They did not hear in Jesus' voice a divine summons to the banquet of life.

The point of the discussion about the gate and the voice is that discernment is called for. Be careful whom you listen to, and which gate you choose. The apparent ring of

exclusion here, and in some other texts in John, occurs because he is concerned to show that it matters which way you choose. But choosing occurs in the overarching context of his Gospel, which is that God's will and intent is to draw the whole world into a flock that enjoys the nourishment of abundant life. This gift of divine love is a deep seated, all embracing frame of reference in John. And in John it is always possible to move from darkness to light, from death to life. In fact John wrote his gospel for one purpose: that people would find life in Jesus' name.

The idea of sheep and shepherds is still connected with our understanding of pastoral leadership in congregational life. Sheep are unambiguously people: members of a community of faith who in all their lostness, are sought out, gathered in and nurtured in such a way that they thrive. Shepherds are meant to be agents of life, who do not abuse or misuse the flock. The mentor for this is Jesus whose life of self-giving, grounded in God's being for us in love, is the source and pattern of our vision for life together.

In the world as we know it the church is called to live from this vision, in its worship and its mission. This is spelled out clearly in the Mission, Vision and Goals of this Congregation that we will receive today. Accepting this document may be an easy thing, but have no doubt that as we seek to live out our commitment, we will encounter tension between the kind of shepherding that works for life, and the kind that robs people of the gift of life. We hardly need reminding how well our age knows death, vengeance and the refusal to forgive, threats to human rights and dignity, and acts of discrimination and terrifying violence which crucify all impulses towards peace and reconciliation.

Yet, on this our AGM day, we are still called to allow ourselves to be shepherded by one who gave his life for the sheep. And we are called to follow his life giving voice in the church, and into the world. If we do this, we will ourselves begin to embody his resistance to the way the world does things. And we will seek ways of supporting voices that name the places where bad spirit is in charge: killing off life and creating division rather than reconciliation. And in this task it may even use religiously plausible language. If we indeed listen for the voice of our shepherd and take on the character of him who is our gate to life, we cannot stand aside from the need to speak to power about the suffering of others. And we may suffer for doing so.

This week someone sent me a link to *You Tube* in which Desmond Tutu speaks. Having fought long and hard for life in South Africa, Tutu now enjoys the fruit of his work. But he has not rested on his laurels. Recently he visited Palestine and witnessed what is happening in Gaza. Because of his experience he names what he saw as another example of apartheid. He says: "Israel will not achieve peace through oppressing the Palestinians". Instead urges both sides to work for a just solution based on reconciliation, without force. And he calls the world to bring pressure to bear for that purpose. Here is a shepherd who understands the nuances of the voice of the Good Shepherd, and speaks in those tones, against death in favour of life. We can see the role the Dalai Llama is taking in support of Tibet in a similar way. And we can see the rival claims that he has aroused, about his leadership and involvement in this issue. It is good that this week the Chinese heard the voice of our PM speaking in their language. Thankfully he did not hold back from addressing the issue of Tibet.

These examples may seem a long way from congregational life, but a people who enter by the gate of Christ will find in his suffering for us an entry into the suffering of others in the world. And they will find that under his leadership, even dark places may yield resources for their participation in God's mission, which is that all people receive the gift of abundant life in Jesus' name.