

## John 10:1-18

<sup>10</sup>“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. <sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” <sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. <sup>7</sup>So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup>All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. <sup>11</sup>“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup>The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup>The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. <sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup>I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd. <sup>17</sup>For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. <sup>18</sup>No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

I’m looking at the shepherd theme today because it always comes up on the calendar on the fourth Sunday after Easter and many churches around us will be focusing on it today.

As the Easter season continues nearly all the way to Pentecost, I'm asking what light does the Resurrection of Christ throw on what John thinks Jesus meant when he said "I am the Good Shepherd." We are going to the Gospel of John to seek some answers. While I've spoken on this text a few times over the years, I always like to come at it fresh.

To break the ground I usually I review some commentaries and translations to find what direction the Spirit might be nudging.

But this time I thought "Why not play around a little with AI. Students are using it to write their essays. Engineers are employing it to solve complex problems. Journalists are resorting to it to meet deadlines for their editors. Surely it can help me find a fresh and meaningful angle on how John's Good Shepherd can speak to the contemporary Australian scene.

I limbered things up by inviting my cyber robot to express our text in various genres

- In the style of Shakespearian sonnet and a Japanese haiku
- after the fashion of a Banjo Patterson bush ballad
- Converted to the lyrics in the style of punk rock rap

Although adept at each of these challenges, AI seemed keen to hang onto the traditional picture of the tall and erect Caucasian figure of Jesus, fairfaced, neatly coifed, well laundered and pressed robe and shouldering a fluffy white lamb while gazing serenely ahead.

Not to be outdone, I told AI to write it in Strine. It seemed to think Strine is a poetic argot, but here goes:

*Oi, listen up mate, I got a yarn to spin,  
'Bout a bloke called the Good Shepherd, he's a top win,  
He's got his sheep sorted, he knows 'em by name,  
And they follow him 'round, without hint of shame.*

*He opens up the gate, they hear his voice,  
And they all follow him, as if by choice,*

*The others they ignore, they don't know their sound,  
But the Good Shepherd, he's always around.*

*And watch out for them dodgy blokes at night,  
The ones who wanna pinch the sheep, give 'em a fright,  
But the Good Shepherd, he won't let that fly,  
He'll fight 'em off, and make sure his sheep don't die.*

*'Cause he's the one who'll lay down his life for his flock,  
He's the one who'll fight for them, around the clock,  
He's the one who'll keep 'em safe, from harm and wrong,  
He's the one who'll lead 'em home, where they belong.*

*So, let's all follow the Good Shepherd, don't you worry,  
He'll lead us to green pastures, in no big hurry,  
And we'll be with him always, never alone,  
'Cause the Good Shepherd, he's the best mate we've known.*

Closer, but I sighed and reverted to form and picked out some key elements to look at. This is the best way to reflect on John's Gospel – it is unlike the others that concentrate on telling a particular story to a particular primary audience in a particular context. John's gospel is a meditation, even a communion, with the Divine. It is many layered. We can come back to it often and discover that it says old things in new ways.

### **Who are the sheep?**

**Andrew Prior points out that** "sheep" are a picture for the people of God, and not a particularly flattering one either, as anyone familiar with sheep knows.

John Petty says:

["I reckon](#) we're mostly like Aussie sheep. I am. We're inclined to keep as far away from the farmer as we can. If the farmer tries to drive us through a gate to good feed, we won't go through. Or we'll be like the mob of sheep my Dad and I had once. They ignored the open gate and the whole 200 hit the fence next to it, flat out, and got themselves tangled up and mangled in the wire, and brought down a hundred and fifty yards of fence. Not one of them went through the open gate!"

This, for me, highlights the animal's vulnerability – our vulnerability. We get rather exercised over the conditions of live exports because of this. Farmers too know the heart break of animals affected by drought – I have seen emotion well up at the prospect of having to shoot their animals.

Yet there are only two reasons for raising sheep, wool and meat. Their destiny is clear. But I know no-one in sheep and cattle that does not exercise attachment and accountability for the stock of which they are in charge.

This segues into the biblical model of animal husbandry. Vulnerability was accounted for by smaller mobs of sheep and shepherds to look after them.

**So who is the shepherd?** Especially the Good Shepherd that typically takes centre stage on the fourth Sunday of Easter celebrations? It is plain that the Good Shepherd knows his sheep personally, fosters and nurtures their welfare, puts himself in danger to protect them from harm.

Suzanne Guthrie reflects that Good Shepherd Sunday promises sentimental loveliness and nostalgia but instead delivers overwhelming challenges.

“I think it's nearly impossible to meditate on Jesus' discourse on the Good Shepherd without hearing Ezekiel 34:1-31 in the background: waking up to the corruption of the bad shepherds, accountability in the causes of justice, and knowing the Holy One as Shepherd.”

The Hebrew tradition, along with its surrounding ancient Middle Eastern cultures, had such a high regard for the figure of the shepherd that rulers, tribal leaders and kings described themselves as such. Good rulers cared for their people; bad rulers exploited them. It's no accident that the prophet Samuel, in seeking to exercise the LORD's direction to select a king for Israel, picked the runt of Jesse's otherwise fine strapping brood – the forgotten one who was out in the paddocks caring for the sheep and thus David became the well-known Shepherd King.

So, the shepherd figure becomes an ancient archetype in our collective memory.

The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols

**The symbolism of the shepherd also holds the sense of a wisdom which is both intuitive and the fruit of experience. The shepherd symbolizes watchfulness. The shepherd's duties entail the constant exercise of vigilance. The shepherd is awake and watching. Hence the shepherd is compared with the Sun, which sees all things, and with the king.**

**Furthermore, since, as we have told, the shepherd symbolizes the nomad, the shepherd is rootless and stands for the soul which is not a native of this Earth but always a stranger and pilgrim. In so far as the shepherd's flock is concerned, the shepherd acts as a guardian and to this is linked knowledge, since the shepherd knows what pasture suits the animals in his charge. The shepherd sees the Heavens, the Sun, the Moon and the stars and can predict the weather. The shepherd distinguishes sounds and hears the noise of approaching wolves, as well as the bleating of lost sheep.**

**Through the different duties which the shepherd performs, he is regarded as a sage whose activities are the result of contemplation and inner vision.**

I'm drawn now to reflect on the word "good." It's a necessarily binary word, but is it necessary? We've already shown that bad shepherds are not shepherds at all, either hirelings that have no interest in the welfare of the sheep or thieves and robbers. Surely this disqualifies them from being named as shepherds. The only real shepherds are good ones, so is the word "good" redundant?

Let William Temple step up to the plate:

### **The Beautiful One**

**The Good Shepherd: The shepherd, the beautiful one. ... it is important that the word for "good" here is one that stands for, not the moral rectitude of goodness, nor its austerity, but it's attractiveness. We must not forget that our vocation is so to practice virtue that people are won to it; it is possible to be morally upright repulsively! In the Lord Jesus we see**

**“the beauty of holiness” (Psalm xcvi,9). He was “good” in such manner as to draw all people to Himself (xii,32). And this beauty of goodness is supremely seen in the act by which He would so draw them, wherein He lays down his life for the sheep.**

-William Temple 1881-1944

Readings in John’s Gospel

The close link of this passage to reminiscences that take place on ANZAC Day is worth pondering. The notion of those “who lay down their lives for their friend – the greatest love” is magnetic. It is deemed “good.”

There is something about the shepherd nature of Jesus that is attractive. Certainly, his popularity is clear throughout his ministry, beyond the crowd pulling miracle working. His embodiment of the words he spoke and taught were compelling and magnetic. We might imagine that the pinnacle of this example setting in his crucifixion and resurrection was underlined when he appeared in Risen form amongst his disciples and followers. The attractiveness, the compelling beauty of his fully realised human nature with the divinity now within reach for all describes an understated goodness. All epitomized in his words “Greater love has no-one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

And thus. In this recognition, we learn our true selves, our true names, in response to the calling voice of the Good Shepherd. John Petty’s stupid and chaotic sheep that are unable to find the open gate lacked a recognizable shepherd voice calling them through.

I remember a short visit to the middle east, standing at a roadside where a flock of sheep was being separated for the night by their shepherds (3 I think). Each shepherd used a particular call, each different, and the sheep responded and went with their particular shepherd to their night enclosure.

**Bruno Barnhart**

**Jesus, the new Adam, is at once shepherd and *Word*, “Name” of God, who is sent to men and women, to call them by name – by their true names in**

the creative Word, which are godly names, generative of divine being. Those who hear the Word of God are gathered into it and become “gods.” Those who receive the Son of God are gathered into him and become children of God (1:12). The violent compulsion which leads Jesus’ hearers to take up stones to kill him (10:31) comes from beyond themselves, from one who would only kill and destroy (see 8:40,44); what they rush forward to destroy is the divine-human life which is their own destiny.

“I have other sheep...there will be one flock, one shepherd” (10:16) “The Father and I are one” (10:30). The sheepfold into which Jesus leads those who hear his voice, who hear him speak their new names – whether they have been Jews or Gentiles – is ultimately this *One*, this *I Am*, which is his own being.

-Bruno Barnhart

The Good Wine, Reading John from the Center

We’ve reflected so far on the Shepherd archetype, beauty/attractiveness, discovery our true nature in him.

Well might we dwell on these reflections. John’s Gospel is many layered and leads us deeper into that beatific experience of union with the crucified and Risen One to the extent that it almost takes our breath away. The danger is that, like Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration, we want to build booths and stay camped on the mountaintop when the mission beckons from the valley.

We have yet to reflect on when Jesus also declares “I am the Gate.”

Take notice when Jesus, particularly in John’s gospel, uses the words “I am”

### **The Gate... what Gate?**

#### **Paul Nuechterlein presents a stunning image**

Why a gatekeeper?? Isn't that a bit formal for the average sheep herd? Marty Aiken mentioned to me last night after the service that he's not a city boy, and he said that the only time he can think of when there might be a gatekeeper for the sheep is when they are brought to the stockyard to be

slaughtered. This is the point, in fact, where the shepherd finally leaves his sheep for good -- or for ill, if you're a sheep. The shepherd does not enter the stockyard with his sheep. He abandons them to the slaughter.

He is worse than the hired man, in fact, for he was the one we followed and trusted with our lives!

It was similar in Jesus' day. There wasn't a gatekeeper at the average sheep pen. But I'll bet there was a gatekeeper at the big Sheep Gate in Jerusalem where the sheep would be led to the great Passover slaughter every year. And this is where the average shepherd would leave his sheep off at the gate, abandoning them to the slaughter. But Jesus is the Good Shepherd who walks right in that gate with the sheep and "goes ahead of them," out the other side of the holding pen into the Temple courtyard to be slaughtered. So, Jesus isn't just laying down his life out in the field for some dangerous wolf. The most dangerous place for a sheep in Jesus' day was out in the Temple courtyard. The wolves are already a metaphor for the sacrificers who come to slaughter the lambs in the sacrificial machinery. Jesus lays down his life as the Lamb of God on the altar of sacrifice.

Bailie also notes that in John 5 "Jesus met the paralytic, whom he cured on the sabbath, at the pool *near the Sheep Gate*, which is the gate in the wall of Jerusalem through which the sheep were led and then held in a holding area on their way to the altar of sacrifice. It was the entry point for the victims of the sacrificial regime."

This reminds me of the Farmer's birthday – the chicken and the pig were deciding what to give him. The chicken says to the pig "Let's make him breakfast. I'll supply the eggs and you supply the bacon."

Pigs are intelligent creatures. "No way. You're only donating while demanding my total commitment!"

The Good Shepherd, in laying down his life, is totally committed. To those who hear his voice.

Andrew Pryor reminds us that Jesus does not keep us away from the killing floor but goes before us and with us. His dying sets us free and takes us toward abundant life. We are free from sacrifice. We are free from the constant crippling



fear of being chosen as the scapegoat, which means we fight always to be at the top and the front and call the shots. Our paralysed humanity is healed.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes reflects

“It’s nice to think of being personally shepherded by Jesus. But it’s not all about our own smug comfort in green pastures. Jesus doesn’t call us just for our sake. It’s to follow him— going somewhere: from town to town, healing and proclaiming grace. People certainly gained benefits from being among the early Jesus-followers. But they also worked, prayed and shared for the sake of the community. Jesus isn’t trying to shepherd us to heaven. He’s shepherding us into the world, to serve with love. It’s also tempting to believe that in Jesus’ care we’ll meet no pain, difficulty or loss. Oh, yeah? The calm, idyllic, pastoral 23rd Psalm leads us right out of green pastures into the valley of the shadow of death. Good Shepherd Jesus doesn’t promise ease and comfort: he promises his loving presence even in awful times. “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” To follow Jesus is to take up a cross, not a lawn chair. Jesus’ image of the good shepherd is one of mutual intimacy. “The shepherd calls his sheep by name ... and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.” He knows them personally, by name. Jesus encourages us to believe in a God who knows us, understands us, and believes in us, who doesn’t just react to us according to the formula of laws and requirements. And the sheep know him well enough to recognize his voice. The point of our faith is not to believe some stuff about Jesus, but to know him like a friend, to engage in a living relationship. I think that’s what it means when he says “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.” In our relationship with Jesus, we enter into a place of rest and belonging, of nurture and empowerment. And we follow him. We know him well enough to listen to him.

