

'I am the gate'

A sermon preached by Geoff Oates on Sunday 11th April 2014 ('Good Shepherd Sunday'))

*"Truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep."
John 10 v 7*

Jesus and Sheep. Yes, we like that image, don't we? If you go into Google images and search under 'shepherd', half the pictures and paintings it shows you are of the Good Shepherd. A tall, calm Jesus, in clean, tidy robes with well trimmed hair and beard, surrounded by nice clean white sheep in lush green meadows. It's never raining, and there are no sheep droppings in sight.

But in between them you'll see a few pictures of real shepherds. Mostly old men with shabby coats and leathery faces, surrounded by, well, sheep coloured sheep either on boggy British hillsides or on dusty, arid Middle Eastern scrubland. Because looking after real sheep has always been a tough, dirty business.

My wife and I had a real 'lost sheep' moment many years ago when we were out hiking on the slopes of Great Whernside in the Pennines. It was cold, raining, off season, and we hadn't seen a soul on the path we were hiking since we left our B&B in Kettlewell. Down below us in a gully, we spotted a sheep. It was lying down, completely motionless, and for all we could tell, dead. We watched for some minutes, unsure what, if anything we should do.

Then out of nowhere a man appeared on the bleak hillside, scrambled up the gully, briefly inspected the sheep, then unceremoniously grabbed the back end of the animal and shoved with all his might. The sheep staggered to its feet, and with no evident sign of surprise or gratitude stumbled off down the gully. The farmer followed without any fuss, and we could see how his hands and his coat were now covered in wet, mud and grease where he had taken hold of the sheep.

I don't know how many sheep that shepherd had in his flock, but he knew one

was missing, somewhere on that vast misty hillside, and he came to find her. All in a day's work for him.

That's just the image of Jesus that makes sense to me. Because that's the kind of sheep I am. I'm not a cute white woolly lamb. I'm wet, and muddy and smelly, with a thick greasy fleece of self-interest which I use to keep myself safe and warm. I'm heavy, hard to help, and not very good at saying thank you. And quite likely I'm going to go and get lost again the next day!

People are not clean, cute and cuddly, any more than real sheep are. Thankfully, Jesus knew that. But he came out to look for us anyway. If he was going to rescue us, he wasn't just going to get dirt on his hands – he was going to get blood on them as well. His own blood. He was going to have to put his life on the line. And he did.

But our text this morning isn't 'I am the Good Shepherd'. It's another metaphor: I am the gate. I'd like each of you just to take a few seconds to imagine – a gate. Any kind of gate. Just picture it in your minds. Have you all got one. I've been talking about sheep; who pictured a farm gate? Who pictured a garden gate? Now, hands up time again. Whose gate was open? Whose gate was shut?

'I am the gate for the sheep'.

Google images, one of my favourite resources for theological research, will throw up a first scoop of 360 pictures if I search on 'gate'. Every kind of gate you can imagine. In 95% of those pictures, the gate is shut! Just 18 were open. I counted them, you've got to do your research thoroughly. It's natural. 'Please close the gate' says the sign on many a country footpath, on many a garden gate. When we think of gates, we think of privacy, keeping people out, or keeping things in. We think of barriers.

But what is a gate really for? It's a gap in the wall, a way through, an easy route to the next place. In Jesus' metaphor, it's the path between the safety of the sheepfold, and the richness of the open pasture outside. Under our shepherd's watchful eye we do not need to huddle anxiously behind the walls of the fold; the whole bounty of God's creation is out there to nourish and delight us, and we are free to come and go.

Jesus was often angry with the religious leaders of his own age. They liked high walls and closed gates, and they liked to turn people away. "You're not holy enough, you don't obey the Law – you don't have the right lifestyle. God won't want you. You're not faithful enough, you don't believe the right creeds, you don't worship in the right way, God won't want you. You had the wrong parents, God only likes people with the right background, people who look like us." Jesus had no time for that.

But how many of those attitudes sneaked straight back in to the Christian Church the minute we thought Jesus' back was turned? It is one of the tragedies of Christian history that so many followers of Christ have passed through His open gate, but have then felt themselves called to close the gate behind them and become gatekeepers. The image of St Peter holding the keys to the gates of heaven has become part of our culture, but a very unhelpful one. It's an image of a gate that is not necessarily closed, but where there is no entry until you've got past the religious security guards.

Or maybe think of the turnstiles you see at sports grounds where you wait patiently in long lines as each person counts his hard earned pennies and hopes he has saved up enough for the admission fee. No, not that kind of gate.

'I am the gate' – the break in the wall, the gap in the fence. You may see barriers around you, but don't worry, and don't start scrambling up the stonework or climbing over the barbed wire.

Jesus says to us, 'I am the place where you can pass through. I'm not here to make things hard for you. Come and go as you please, the invitation is open. Here is safety, and here is rich pasture, you don't have to choose; both are my gifts to you. 'I am the gate', have faith, walk through me, and discover it all.

On Codicote Heights – Stephen Bardle

Seeking a sunny interlude
From sorrows I'd slowly accrued,
I traversed old hills on a bike
To rest on an ancient turnpike.
Nearby two shadows had delayed
An exodus through fields remade
By each created wind above
Till, hand-in-hand, they clamped their love.

"Behind us, walk our unborn tribe,
Before us, our prospective guide,
A church, where our ancestors lay,"
The soul said to the soul that stayed.
"Poor Moses I, who can't inspire
A serpent rod or cloudy fire.
To motivate our liberty
I'll poet metaphysically.

For Time, my love, it's Time that's real!
As earthy as the soil we fill,
And fertile too, for without Time
The Lord's Creation could not chime.
The rivers would no longer flow;
Un-sprung the muntjac; high nor low
The stilted trees. All unfulfilled
If timeless were Codicote fields.
But during winters of decay
Time beds the red-rose-roots for May;
And when they wither back to earth
Each petal gives new offspring birth.
Mountains, like pencils, sharpest be
When new, but the most seasoned tree
Retires into its greenery
To spring again in melody.
An enemy, you say? It's true
The body is by Time subdued,
But wisdom is a strange surprise
To minds Time's left unexercised.
Best safety, then, to seize the day
As we step out onto the way."

But I, an uproot from the land,
Continued on my ride unplanned,
Hoping meanwhile to reconcile
Two souls within for each new mile.