

John | Oh, that today you would listen to God's voice!

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Alison Sampson, reflecting on John 10:1-10

plus Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23, Psalm 95 and other texts

Many years ago, my husband and I stayed at a little bed and breakfast on the shores of Lake Te Anau. As we chatted with the other guests over breakfast, we quickly realised they were all sheep farmers. The couple from New South Wales ran 20,000 sheep, and checked on their flocks by helicopter. The couple from New Zealand ran 2,000 sheep, and ran among their flocks in an old ute. The couple from the UK raised just 20 sheep of a rare and precious breed. Each day, they fed and combed each sheep by hand, and yes, they knew every sheep by name and their sheep knew their voice.

Living as we do on this continent in an age of agribusiness, it can be hard to comprehend the intimacy of the imagery in John's gospel. Most of us are urban and spend very little time around sheep. When we do, flocks tend to be enormous. In our context, the idea that any but a hobby farmer could name and know each sheep seems ridiculous. Yet that is how most people have raised sheep for most of human history. Even today, in Italy and Jordan and Israel and even in the UK, you can see men and women tending very small flocks. Sheep and shepherd are in intimate relationship. The shepherd knows each sheep's name, habits and foibles; and the sheep follow the shepherd, because they recognise his voice and trust him to lead them to the next bite of grass, and the next.

Of course, when Jesus talks about shepherds knowing their flocks, he isn't really talking about farmers. Nor is he yet talking about himself; that comes a bit later. Instead, his words about sheepfolds, gates, shepherds and sheep are said to some religious leaders after the healing of a man born blind.

To refresh your memory, the religious leaders first cast shade on whether the man had actually been blind, revealing that they did not know him. Then they said that, since the healing had happened on the sabbath, it was sinful. They called the man and his parents in for questioning, and grilled them and verbally abused them. The man's parents became so intimidated, they absolved themselves of any responsibility for their adult son. Then the

religious leaders drove the man out, exiling him from the community and, presumably, from his own parents.

Just in case you think of this as one of those quaint and irrelevant stories pertaining to a less enlightened era, let me say here that many LGBTQ+ people have experienced exactly this sequence of events from church leaders. They've been told their experience isn't real; they've been grilled, verbally abused and intimidated; they've been set at odds with their parents; they've been driven away from their community and separated from family and friends.

It is into this dynamic that Jesus is speaking. 'What sort of shepherd are you?' he is in effect asking. Someone has just been healed. So, do you know his name or his circumstances? Are you celebrating his transformation? Are you glorifying God? Are you using this moment to encourage him and build up the community? Are you showing even a skerrick of love?

Of course, the religious leaders were doing none of those things. Instead they were hostile, gaslighting, terrorizing, dividing, and their approach made people spiritually impoverished and afraid. According to Jesus, leaders like these are thieves and robbers, and they're everywhere. In religious hierarchies, in politics, in the news, we see leaders who prey on people's fears, who divide communities, and who use their position to exploit, kill and destroy. It might be expressed through homophobia and transphobia, it might be expressed through white supremacy or Christian nationalism, or it might simply be a small scared hollow person abusing a position of power. For all they cry out, 'Lord, Lord,' such leaders have absolutely no authority from Jesus.

True shepherds are different. They enter through the gate which is Jesus, the gate which promises full and flourishing life. In other words, true shepherds foster life and connection. They know their flock; they care for each member. They know their names and concerns and needs. They understand people's fears, but don't exploit them. Instead, they speak to their deepest hopes. They long to see the people flourish, and so they draw them towards growth. For not only do they walk people through the gate into the sheepfold, that place of safety, security and sanctuary, they also lead them out again to the places where they will thrive.

Indeed, the gate is wide open. We're so focussed on borders and barriers, walls and enclosures, good guys and bad guys and modern agricultural

fencing, that we tend to think of the gate as keeping people out. And so some will argue that, if Jesus is the gate, then Jesus is a sorting mechanism which tells us who's beyond the bounds of grace.

But this is not Matthew's sheep and goats; it's John's story, where everyone's a sheep. Jesus is talking in an ancient Middle Eastern context. Just as in Cornwall and Scotland and so many other places, the gate is simply an opening in a stone wall. It's not a one-way flap to keep the cat in; it's not about bureaucrats, passports or border control. Instead, it's a passageway, an invitation, a means of letting sheep in. And it's the way they are led out in the company of the shepherd to quiet waters, green pastures.

Better, perhaps, to say gateway. For Jesus is the gateway through which life flows into the world for its healing, restoration and renewal. The gateway enables communion between heaven and earth, guest and host, insider and outsider, stranger and friend. Like the gates of the heavenly city in Revelation, which always stand open no matter who's at the gate, this gateway is infinitely hospitable and will reconcile all things. Only shepherds who come through this gateway and let it shape them are good news for the sheep.

What, then, of the sheep? Well, there's not much to say. Sheep are not exactly known for their excellence or their competence. If anything, they're known for vulnerability, for skittishness, for foolishness. They're known for their tendency to stray. They're known for their utter dependency on a shepherd to seek them out when they're lost, to bind their wounds and to carry them safely home. And they're known for their utter dependency on a shepherd to go before them, leading them to where they can assuage their hunger and quench their thirst. They'll follow a shepherd who calls them by name and whose voice they recognise. And that's about it.

So let's think about the hallmarks of that voice.

The blind man had a poultice of mud placed on his eyes. Then he was sent by Jesus to wash in the pool of Siloam. He did not see Jesus. But after he had been driven out of the community of faith, Jesus searched him out and found him. The man recognised the voice of the one who healed him, and placed his trust in him.

After Jesus' death, Mary Magdalene encountered a man she thought was the gardener. But when he said, 'Mary,' she recognised the voice of the one who knew her name, and placed her trust in him.

At the sea of Tiberias, the disciples met a man who told them where to cast their nets. They hauled in 153 fish, a huge catch, one for every known country of the world at that time. They recognised the voice of the one who led them to abundance and to new people and places, and placed their trust in him.

Later, Peter was taken aside. He had denied Jesus three times; he was no doubt roiling in shame. Three times the Risen Lord asked him, ‘Do you love me? Feed my sheep.’ Peter recognised the voice of the one who forgave, and forgave, and forgave each denial, and renewed his trust in him.

Later still, in Jerusalem, disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and empowered to feed the sheep. It led them to devote their lives to Jesus-centred teachings, to fellowship, to shared meals and to prayer; and when they did these things they saw an explosion of life. In Acts 2, it took the form of a common purse, rapid numerical growth, and the goodwill of all people. In other stories, it took on different forms: but all point to abundant life, green pastures, people named and cherished and known.

‘The Most High is our God,’ sings the Psalmist. ‘We are the people of God’s pasture and the flock of God’s hand. Oh, that today you would listen to God’s voice!’ (Psalm 95:7). And I wonder: Do we place our deepest trust in this voice, or in our budgets, our buildings, our bank accounts? Put another way, what does it look like to really listen to the voice that is God in Christ?

The good shepherd is recognised through hospitality and healing, seeking and naming, abundance, mission, forgiveness, commission. As members of Christ’s body, charged to continue his work, how do we participate in these things? How do we seek, name, cherish, shelter and protect others, and lead them to green pastures? Where is God’s goodness flowing through us and out into the world? As we ponder these questions, let us turn to God in prayer: Loving God, may your will be done, your love be shown, your voice be known, ever more powerfully right here at MUC. Amen. Ω