

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

GOOD SHEPHERD AND GATE

19th March 2017

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23-24
John 10:1-18

Some people have a very picturesque way of speaking. I used to know an Australian girl who would say things like, "Here I go, faster than a koala up a gum tree." Or, "I'm off, quicker than a bucket of prawns in the noon-day sun." And then she would add "Our noon sun, not yours." I think she thought of Scottish noon sun as a bit like a fridge. Anyway, it added spice to her conversation. I don't know if she consciously realised it, but she used a lot of metaphors, and metaphors which, at least to Scottish ears, sounded fresh and original.

As a former English teacher, I know how to appreciate a metaphor. I also know what is wrong with something like this: "My enthusiasm has gone off the boil, like a wilted flower." What is wrong? Yes, it's a mixed metaphor. Things that boil, usually pots, do not wilt, and flowers do not boil. And your English teacher will have told you, even if you don't remember, not to mix your metaphors (though Shakespeare was known to do it sometimes).

In the passage we read today, Jesus is guilty of mixing his metaphors terribly. As you listened to it being read, did you notice that at one time he says he is the gate, through whom the shepherd and the sheep pass, and then immediately after he likens himself to the good shepherd. As we think in these weeks of Lent of the things Jesus said about himself, the "I am's" today we have "I am the gate-slash-good shepherd."

Jesus was a good communicator, and he knew how to use verbal pictures in his speech. Think of the parables which dotted his teaching, each of them a kind of extended metaphor. There is the lost coin or the lost sheep, metaphors for our lostness and God's seeking love. The mustard seed growing into a great plant, a metaphor for the way that God's Kingdom grows and spreads on the earth, without anyone noticing till it is there. The pearl of great price, a metaphor for the value of knowing God through Jesus, to the extent that nothing else is worth having if we don't have him. All kinds of vivid images glow from Jesus' teaching. So why does he muddle things up here? Shepherd or gate, which is he saying, which is more important?

Of course, it is both. By using both these metaphors, Jesus is talking about how he is the security for his people. He is the gate which keeps them in at night and keeps predators from them, and he is the shepherd who leads them by day, finding pasture for them, helping them avoid unsafe pathways, making sure that their – our – lives are full, fulfilled, abundant.

We know a fair amount about sheep hereabouts, of course. That is our advantage when dealing with the many biblical texts which talk about them, either as sheep

themselves - some parts of the story of Jacob have quite a lot about sheep and sheep husbandry in them - or when sheep are used as a metaphor for people. It is easier for us to understand such metaphors than, for instance, children I met in Alaska, who had seen pictures of sheep but knew nothing about them, not even if they were as big as a dog or an elephant. But we also need to be careful that we don't think too much of the sheep we know, and the shepherding we know, when we read our Bibles.

Middle Eastern sheep were, and are, a different breed from our Black-face or Cheviots, or even the more exotic Jacobs sheep or the Zwartables. Sheep in the Middle East are not so woolly, more hairy, and in fact look quite a bit like our wild goats that roam over Creag Dhu. They are not driven by the shepherd on foot or on quad-bike, nor by dogs. Instead the shepherd, who spends most of his life amongst them, learns to know them, their faces, their personalities, their needs; and they learn to know their shepherd, especially his voice. So when they have spent the night in a communal village pen, the shepherd can call his own sheep out from the larger groups and they will follow him. In small communities, this still happens.

When Jesus calls himself the gate, he is talking about being a barrier against harm coming to the flock. Often the gate of the sheep pen was the shepherd himself, who slept across the opening, and so was on hand to deal with wolves or thieves. Jesus is saying that when we are unaware of danger, he is still around to help and protect us.

When he changes the metaphor to him being like the good shepherd, he is talking of when we are on the move, when we are awake, when we know that there are decisions to make, that we have to be active. Then if we, like good sheep, look to and follow the good shepherd, he will keep us safe.

It all sounds very nice and peaceful and pastoral, doesn't it? It is like these idyllic pictures in children's Bibles, or Bible story-books, where the (usually clean, pale-skinned) shepherd sits in the sun on a flowery hillside and the sheep graze contentedly around him. But life is so often not nice and peaceful and, even in a rural area, it is often not pastoral. And Jesus, remember, used his life to illustrate his words. And these words are illustrated, not by a healing or a feeding or by a miraculous sign. No, they are illustrated by his crucifixion. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep," he said.

That is the difference between the good shepherd and all other voices which would call to us: political voices, idealistic voices, cultural voices. There are many people nowadays who want our allegiance, who want us to follow them. We even use this terminology about social media, and people have so many hundreds or thousands - or tens - of followers on Twitter or snapchat or whatever. But those we follow will rarely put themselves out for us, never mind lay down their lives for us. You know who your true friends are when you find yourself in trouble of one kind or another, and you find who is best to follow when there are hard choices to make, when things are not nice and peaceful and pastoral.

The prophet Ezekiel mixed his metaphors too when he was recording God's comforting promises to shepherd and care for his people. At one point he says "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep," and later he says, "I will set over them one shepherd, my servant, David." And you might want to ask, "Well, which?" But again, it is both. This is God's promise to his beleaguered people, who were far from being in a safe

and peaceful place, that he would shepherd them, and do it by one of David's line; David, the shepherd-King who was by this time synonymous with care and good leading. And we know that the one he sent was Jesus. When Jesus shepherds his people, it is God caring for them. It is not as good as God caring, it is God caring, because the two are one.

In both cases, these are words of comfort, even if they are not words of peace. It is because life is not peaceful and pastoral that we need God's shepherding, that we need Jesus leading us, helping us to negotiate all the hazards that come along our path. It is because there are times of illness, and of indecision, because families sometimes fall out, because churches do not measure up to what we might hope of them; it is because political systems fail us, and leaders disappoint; because sometimes human choices bring war or famine or tides of refugees; because we do not live a simple, perfect pastoral life that we need our good shepherd.

We need him, and we need to learn to know his voice, so that in the kerfuffle and chaos of real life, when things are all happening at once, not just one thing at a time, we can easily and clearly learn to hear him call us, and follow him on sometimes twisting paths. We need him, and so we need also to spend time getting to know him, spending time with him, so that in the heat of a difficult moment we will not have to listen too hard to discern his voice, the voice of love for us and the voice urging us to make the loving choices in our lives.

We need him, not just as a picturesque figure of speech, but as a real guide and protector, as the one who cares for us, always, not just sometimes, and who will not leave us in difficult times, but will, and has, laid down his life for us. The crucifixion is what the good shepherd is all about. He has laid down his life, and it was not calm and heroic, but loud and painful, confusing and brutal, but he did it so that he could be the only good shepherd, the only one whose voice is worth picking out amid the other voices shouting for our attention.

The gate, though, is only useful to us if we are inside the fold, and the good shepherd is no use to sheep who decide that they need not follow. Jesus laid down his life, so that he could bring his other sheep into the flock – and that is us, the Gentiles, those outside the Jewish community to whom he was speaking. We think of his death as we come towards the end of the season of Lent, in a few weeks. But his death is robbed of some of its purpose if his sheep do not listen to his voice and follow. Listening is difficult. Sometimes it is harder for those who have been in the flock for a while, because we tend to think we know what he will say in any situation, about any issue. But day by day as individuals and as a church we follow him into uncharted territory – we have not walked this way before, as people, as a church, as a nation, as the world – and we need to keep listening with open ears and open minds if we would not find that inadvertently, and with the best of intentions, we have stopped following, and wandered away from the sheep-fold. May we be those who are alert and listening to the shepherd who leads us through the world, and for the sake of the world, with love. Amen.