

April 26th 2026 John 10.1-10

Sermon

This week's Gospel passage speaks of a shepherd whose sheep know him by the distinctiveness of his voice. There is mobile, multifaceted imagery in this passage. Besides shepherds and sheep there is also a thief, a bandit, a gatekeeper and a gate, a stranger, a hired hand, a wolf and other elements. These as well as the central image of shepherd/sheep encourage readers to exercise your imaginations to explore issues of trust, who you listen to, who is out to harm you and destroy you, who is a good leader who is a bad leader and how you can stay clear of danger and conflict and find life shaping decisions and abundant life.

Let's start with voices. Which voices do we listen to?

Celebrities are often remembered for their catchphrase. Get a pithy catchphrase and you are remembered:

Not like that, just like that!

Oh you are awful but I like you!

Nice to see you to see you nice!

These voices, have surely long been in the repertoire of any would-be stand-up comedic impersonator.

Some might frown upon those who have built such a career by using the voices of others but, in some sense, clergy and worship leaders have been doing it for centuries. So today we use words from the Bible, written by John, to hear Jesus speak about the voice of a shepherd.

John's Gospel is famous for Jesus 'I am...' sayings. In John 10:7-9 Jesus states twice: 'I am the gate'. This is closely followed in verse 11 by Jesus expanding his sheep illustration as he also says: 'I am the good shepherd.' Let's face it, the gate one is of the more weird ones. 'I am a gate?!' But it gets you thinking. We will come back to that later.

Our ears are bombarded with loud and influential voices every day. Some of them are worth listening to, either for entertainment value or for worthy advice. Jesus speaks of sheep and sheepfold and shepherd as an illustration that he knows us. But, unlike so many celebrities or public figures, Jesus wants us to get to know him too. That it is in knowing him more, that we will have more of life!

Some of those voices we can trust. Others we should not listen to. Some want to be like a thief – they come to steal and destroy. Who can you trust?

But at the heart of our faith is the call to trust. To place our lives, our futures, our hope in Jesus, the Good Shepherd. The one who not only would, but did, lay down his life so that we might understand the love God has for us and the abundant life he wants us all to live.

In this week's reading (John 10:1-15) we hear how Jesus calls us by our name and we follow because we know his voice. We recognise a truth more ancient and profound and powerful than anything we might hear in this information-laden age. Spend time in the scriptures. Get familiar with the teaching and life of Jesus and then you will recognise his voice, his calling in the world around you.

"I heard that voice and I thought, I know exactly who that is!" The man just ahead of me in the queue for a late-night station snack was greeting an old friend of his and clearly very excited to have found him in the crowd. Have you ever recognised someone you like or love by the sound of their voice, even when you couldn't see their face? Or perhaps by some other means, like the way that they walk, or their coat on a chair? How do you feel when you spot someone you're happy to know in a crowded place? What are some of the ways you recognise God's presence in the midst of a crowded life?

What about leadership?

Jesus said he is the Good Shepherd – and says it to contrast himself to bad shepherds. It is a comparison between good leaders and bad leaders.

The shepherd imagery has always been a metaphor for taking care of people by those in responsibility.

There's a story about an Army sergeant and a private who were doing survival training in the Rocky Mountains. As they made their way through the wood, suddenly they encountered a big angry grizzly bear in the distance that was about to attack them.

Quickly the sergeant sat down, ripped off his heavy hiking boots, took some running shoes out of his backpack, put them on and laced them up in a hurry.

The private stood there watching in disbelief. 'Excuse me sir' he said. 'Do you really think that you're going to be able to outrun that bear?'

'Well private', replied the sergeant 'I don't have to outrun the bear. I only have to outrun you!'

The parable of that story and the message in this chapter of John's gospel is that that the world offers us leaders who don't really have our best interests at heart but look after themselves first and foremost.

Many people know what it is like to work for a boss whose sole allegiance is to him or herself. In other words, if the situation becomes him or you, he's going to save himself as the sergeant was trying to do in the story of the bear.

What the pandemic made us realize was that the only way we got through that was by a collective effort – by us looking out for one another.

Never before had the NHS been so treasured, never before has the country relied on Big Government to step in and pay people's wages and offer guarantees for loans and grants to keep businesses afloat. We are still trying to pay that public debt off even though it contributes to higher taxation.

Memories are short aren't they? I hope none of us is going to begrudge paying taxes after this because it is that collective insurance, everybody looking out for each other, rather than each one on their own, which is the big moral, the big learning point, of the pandemic crisis.

Jesus makes a distinction here between good and bad shepherds. One comes to steal and destroy the lives of others. One comes to bring life in all its fulness – to seek the wellbeing of others not of themselves. It's a text about leadership and power.

The Good Shepherd is willing to lay down his life for his sheep.

I know of only one sure fire way to determine whether my leader is really in my corner. Is she or he willing to take a bullet that was meant for me? It would be like the sergeant in the story saying 'private, you run for cover; I'll stay here and take on the grizzly bear'

If you are in a leadership position you have to earn respect and you earn it by looking after those you lead and, where you can, protecting them and not your own back. Though of course there are plenty in the world who see it differently.

Jesus makes it a test of a true shepherd that they are not just in it for themselves. The issue of sacrifice is a touchstone.

There is a story about a new recruit who went into training hoping to become a marine. He was one of those young men who seemed a bit out of his depth and didn't quite fit in. He easily became the subject of ridicule for those who enjoy picking on slightly strange people.

In the particular barracks to which this young marine was assigned, there was an extremely high level of meanness. The other young men did everything they could to make a joke of the new recruit and to humiliate him.

One day, someone came up with the bright idea that they could scare the living daylight out of this young marine by dropping a disarmed grenade onto the floor and pretending that it was about to go off. Everyone else knew about this and they were already for a big laugh.

The hand grenade was thrown into the middle of the floor and the warning was yelled. 'It's a live grenade, it's a live grenade! It's about to explode!'

They fully expected that the young man would get hysterical and perhaps jump out of a window. Instead, the young marine fell on the grenade, hugged it to his stomach, and yelled to the other men in the barracks, 'run for your lives! Run for your lives! You'll be killed if you don't'

The other marines froze in stillness and shame. They realized that the one they had scorned was the one ready to lay down his life for them.

And so, it was with Jesus. The Son of God, who could make the storms cease and blind see, gave himself for us on the cross, so that we may know the love and forgiveness of God towards us.

He is the Good Shepherd. He is someone you can rely on. He has come not for his own benefit, not to look after his own back, but so that we may have life, life in all its fullness, life abundant.

What about you?

If you are in a position of leadership how self-motivated are you? How motivated by a sense of purpose and service are you?

Who inspires you?

We ordain and induct new elders today and we pray for Justin and Nathan as they take on the task of leader in this church and we pray they will be inspired by the Good Shepherd.

It is a big responsibility, especially when it comes to caring for people and protecting the flock.

Third point Protecting the flock

Jesus also says he is the Gate. Shepherds in Jesus time would lie across the front of the sheep pen at night to be a human gate for the sheep. Making sure no one wandered off and got lost and potentially at risk of being preyed upon. And conversely thieves and wolves couldn't get in to steal kill and destroy the flock.

Gates can be open and welcome people in. Gates can be closed to stop certain people coming in.

Are there people we need to be protected from?

A while back one of our members was the victim of domestic abuse and I was involved in trying to protect her. Her husband, the abuser, was angry at my intervention and

threatened to come to church and confront me. Rod and a few of the other guys were on high alert at the back of church that day preventing him from entering the church.

I was at a church leaders meeting in Stroud the other week, representing Rodborough Tabernacle, one of my other churches. There is a man who is banned from certain churches over there because he protests and disrupts church services when a woman is leading the worship because he believes that is offensive to God.

Another man, who is a victim of solvent abuse, has his mugshot on church noticeboards because he enters churches and becomes violently aggressive. Church wardens are under orders to phone the police if they see him.

Then there is the issue of pedophiles, child abusers, and whether they should be welcomed in the church and if so how they should be watched to ensure they have no contact with children.

Gatekeepers – protecting the flock. Stopping some people from entering.

Then there was one of our members who had lost his faith and didn't want to come to church because he didn't want to spread his doubts and undermine other people's faith.

Protecting the flock of God. Some serious and complex issues.

And then there is concern for those whose lives are being destroyed, especially by poverty.

Joan Kingham was a much loved member and elder of Dursley Tabernacle and was a lay preacher around the district. She died at the age of 99 in December 2017. She was a Christian who lived for others. Her first priority was serving her Lord, her Shepherd, and those who Christ cared for. She told me I had to preach on this text at her funeral. John chapter 10, verse 10: I have come that they may have life, life in all its fullness.

She didn't want her funeral to be focused solely on the gift of eternal life through Christ, wonderful though that is. The Christian gospel is Good News. But Joan wanted it made clear that following Christ meant the fulness of life now, it should be good news for all in this world now not just the next. If we follow Jesus we actively take up his ministry and carry on his work, feeding the hungry, lifting the broken and lowly, reconciling and offering forgiveness, and sharing the love of God with all – now and not just thinking and waiting for heaven.

Christian Aid, is an organisation that Joan was very committed to. She worked tirelessly for Christian Aid, and for the plight of the poor and hungry.

Joan loved the Christian Aid slogan 'We believe in life before death'. It summed up what she worked for and longed for. Joan gave her life to help others experience life in all its fullness. I hope you can support Christian Aid at this time of world need. When

governments are turning from aid to others and spending their money instead on guns and bombs and defence

Jesus said, 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'

11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Our own word for good doesn't quite catch the full meaning of the word John has written here. The word John uses can also mean 'beautiful'. This doesn't refer to what Jesus looked like. It's the sheer attractiveness of what, as a Shepherd, he was doing. When he calls - people want to come. When they realize he has died for them, they want to come even more. The point of calling Jesus 'the Good Beautiful Shepherd' is to emphasize the strange, compelling power of his love.

You belong as sheep of his pasture. You are loved - so much that the shepherd will lay down his life for you. It's that simple and it can also be that profound and beautiful.

And what about Jesus? You may believe Jesus is the Good Shepherd but can you say the Lord is MY shepherd.

It is not enough to believe - you have to make that step of commitment. You can believe Jesus is the Good Shepherd but can you say that Jesus is MY shepherd and I am part of his flock, the sheep of his pasture.

There was once a Shakespearean actor who was known far and wide for his one man shows of readings and recitations from the classic. He would always end his performances with a dramatic reading of the 23rd Psalm. Each night without exception, as the actor began his recitation - the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want - the crowd would listen attentively. And then at the conclusion of the psalm they would rise in thunderous applause in appreciation of the actor's incredible ability to bring the verse to life.

But one night, just before the actor was to offer his customary recital of psalm 23 an old man from the audience spoke up and said 'sir, do you mind if tonight I recite the 23rd Psalm?'

The actor was quite taken aback by this unusual request, but he allowed the old man to come forward and stand at the front of the stage and recite the psalm, knowing that the ability of this unskilled old man was no match for his own.

With a soft and broken voice the old man recited the words of the psalm. When he had finished there was no applause. There was no standing ovation as on other nights. All that could be heard was the sound of weeping. The audience had been so moved by the old man's rendition that every eye was full of tears.

Amazed by what he heard the actor said he didn't understand . I've been performing the 23rd Psalm for years he said. I have a lifetime of experience and training but I have never been able to move an audience as you have tonight. Tell me what is your secret?'

The old man humbly replied, 'well sir, you know the psalm... but I know the shepherd.'

The bible is just another book unless you know the author. When you put your faith in Jesus Christ, when you truly open your heart to him and pray for him to enter your life the Bible becomes real and a love letter to you. The voice of God to you.

Have you heard the voice of Jesus? The Good Shepherd knows his sheep and they know him.

People: we have a shepherd we can rely on. A shepherd who doesn't lose his sheep. A shepherd who would lay down his life for his sheep.

Lord lead us on the right pathways to green pastures. Bless us, give us peace, comfort, and hope. Help us know that your home is always there for us, with a table prepared and a cup that runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy will follow us all our days.

Amen.