

Acts 2.42-end

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

my whole life long.

1 Peter 2.19-end

For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is

that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

“He committed no sin,

and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

John 10.1-10

“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. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Before the lockdown I visited Derbyshire, where there seemed to be more sheep than people, and twice as many lambs. More than once we were stopped to let a flock of unruly, panic-stricken sheep cross the road! When you think about sheep and about shepherds, I wonder what image comes to your mind. You might picture them in a field, enclosed by a fence or a hedge; or roaming the hillsides in Cumbria or in Scotland, where sheepdogs are often used to round them up. And if you have ever walked into a flock of sheep, you will know how easily they rush off in blind panic, oblivious to any possible danger. However you might think of them, I am sure you can readily conjure up a picture in your mind. That's why, I am sure, Jesus used everyday things to illustrate his teaching such images helped his hearers – and ourselves – to understand and to remember his words. In biblical times, the image of a shepherd is frequently used of kings and leaders of Israel. When Moses knows his earthly life is almost at an end, he asks God to appoint a leader for the people, so they will not be “like a sheep without a shepherd”. In the 23rd Psalm which we had today, God himself is seen as a shepherd ... one who meets our needs ... refreshes our souls ... who protects us from evil and leads us to safe pasture who is present with us in the deepest, darkest moments of our lives. Prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah frequently criticised the kings of Israel for their bad shepherding ... for indulging themselves whilst disregarding the needs of their people, for leaving them scattered and helpless ... for exploiting them, rather than caring for them. Such images may well have been in the mind of Jesus when he talked to the crowds in today's Gospel reading. But he was almost certainly also speaking against the background of 'bad shepherding' in his own day ... those more concerned with their own needs and their own agenda, than those of the people. Those he calls 'thieves and bandits' are Israel's leaders, condemned by the prophets as false shepherds, leading the sheep (the people) astray. Jesus, by contrast, spoke of himself as the “Good Shepherd”, and warned of the danger of following the false shepherd. And we don't have to look very far in today's world, do we, to see examples of that. This morning's Gospel reading is part of a longer dialogue beginning with the previous chapter, which is dominated by such questions as: “is Jesus from God or not? Is he a prophet or not? Is he the Messiah or not? Good and bad human shepherds may look very much alike ... so how could they ... and we ... recognize the true shepherd, the true Messiah? Mark records an occasion when, after a day of teaching and healing, Jesus took his disciples across the lake for a time of peace and rest. But the crowd was so eager to

follow him that they arrive ahead of him. On seeing them his heart went out to them because they seemed “like sheep without a shepherd”. Despite his own need for rest and refreshment ... he fed them and taught them and healed them. He put their needs before his own. He also knows his sheep by name and they recognise his voice. This may sound fanciful to us, but in first century Palestine, and indeed in eastern communities today, the shepherd would have known each of his sheep by name, and they would have recognised his voice ... his particular call ... and – and this is the key – had learnt to trust him. “And having called them out”, said Jesus, “he would go on ahead of them and lead them to safe pasture”. I was reading the other day that, to this day, in the Middle East, a shepherd can go into a crowded sheepfold – where there are a number of different flocks – and call his sheep one by one, and they come to him. And, as Jesus said in this parable, they will not respond to the voice of another shepherd. But to go on ahead of them and lead them? Really? That's not our picture of a shepherd, is it? My friend told me in Turkey, he saw, one evening a shepherd boy leading his flock back to his village for the night. The sheep were fanned out behind him, following him down the hillside ... It brought a whole new meaning to this passage for me, and I've never forgotten it. Such a sight would have been very familiar to those listening to Jesus. But above all ... a good shepherd so loved the sheep, that he was willing to risk his very life to bring them into the safety of the fold and to protect them. In the winter time, sheep would have been kept in a locked enclosure. During the summer, however, they would have been out on the hillside, and brought into the safety of an enclosure for the night. If several flocks were kept in the same fold, a watchman would guard the entrance. There was no gate or door, and so the shepherd himself would lie down across the doorway. He was literally, the gate to stop sheep getting out and predators from getting in. “I am the gate ...said Jesus ... whoever enters through me will be saved – he will come in and go out and find pasture”. Jesus is the true shepherd –whose priority is looking after his sheep. He is the one who knows us – more deeply than we know ourselves – who calls us by name – who seeks us out when we have lost our way – who puts our needs before his own, and who, through his death upon the cross – has become, for us, the very gate into the safety of God's eternal fold and the abundant life of which he spoke. The more we open our hearts to him in prayer and worship, the more we listen to and reflect upon his word, the more able we will be to recognize his call.