

Reading: John 10:1-10

Open the words of Scripture to us O God.

I'm a little bit qualified to talk about today's reading. After all, I had a job on a sheep and gorse farm behind Pleasant Point. It was my job to round up the sheep and bring them down from the top paddock for shearing. That was okay, in fact it was fun because they gave me a Honda 250 to do it with and a dog. Unless you swore at the dog it was useless. But the motorbike was four stroke and it had a throaty roar which got the sheep moving on. But they learnt quickly not to give me the job of counting the sheep because every time I did it I would go to sleep.

The image our Gospel gives us of Jesus being the gate to the sheepfold can seem a bit odd until we discover that in his day shepherds would sleep across the opening in the fence. They literally became the gate. They would go to sleep after counting the sheep.

The idea of the sheep recognising the voice of the shepherd can seem a bit odd to us too. After all, don't you push sheep from behind rather than calling them from in front?

A recent visitor to the Holy land wrote of what greeted them early one morning. Not far from Bethlehem two shepherds had spent the night with their flocks in a cave. The sheep had become all mixed together and the time had come for the shepherds to go in different directions. One of the shepherds stood some distance from the sheep and began to call, first one then another then four then five animals ran toward him and so on until he had counted his whole flock. He had nicknames for each of the sheep: Floppy Ears, Fluffy Bum, Rosemary and Ethan. They knew his voice and came running. How different that is to my experience on a sheep farm in South Canterbury.

Jesus goes on to explain not only do the sheep know his voice but that he goes ahead of them. He is as the Bible describes him - our pioneer through the way of death, and he concludes: "I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly."

Jesus is using this image of himself as the shepherd because it is an image of intimate care. The image would have been well known to his first audience even if it has become a little obscure for us. Jesus is deeply concerned for each one of us. He wants the best for us. He tenderly cares for us. He calls and he protects us.

We might forget how radical this idea of a tender caring God was to those first followers of Jesus. The Gospel writers looked back on Jesus' life and teaching and they could see that not only did he teach of a God who tenderly and intimately cares for each one of us but he lived it as well. No greater love can we have for another Jesus explains than to lay down our life for our friends. Jesus is the one who laid down his life for us. With Jesus you find total integrity. His words match his actions. He speaks love, he lives love and he dies love.

The instinct to want to live for others even to die for others is God given. And we see humanity at its very best when someone is totally committed to serving others.

Years ago In a small fishing village in Holland a young boy taught the world about the reward of living like Jesus. Because the entire village revolved around fishing, a volunteer rescue team was needed in case of emergency. One night the winds raged, the clouds burst and a gale force wind capsized a fishing boat at sea. Stranded and in trouble, the crew sent out an SOS. The captain of the rescue row boat team sounded the alarm and the villagers assembled overlooking the bay. The team launched their row boat while the villagers waited restlessly holding lanterns in the darkness.

An hour later the rescue boat reappeared through the fog and the cheering villagers ran to meet them. Falling exhausted on the sand the volunteers reported that the rescue boat could not hold any more passengers and they had to leave one man behind. One more would have surely capsized the rescue boat.

Frantically the captain called for another volunteer team to go after the one left behind. Sixteen year old Hans stepped forward. His mother grabbed him pleading, “Please don’t go. Your father died at sea and your older brother is missing. Hans you are all I have left.”

Hans replied, “Mother, I have to go. What if everyone said someone else will do it. This time I have to do my duty.” Hans kissed his mother goodbye and disappeared with the fresh team into the night.

Another hour passed which to Hans’ mother felt like an eternity. Finally the rescue boat came through the fog with Hans standing at the bow. Cupping her grateful hands the mother called out. “Did you find the lost man?” “Yes,” he yelled back, “and it’s my brother Paul.”

In our Covid 19 world we see often the unselfish service of so many following the example of our Good Shepherd who laid down his life in order that we might have life.

Following the challenge of these words from our Gospel Christians in the ancient world became a force for good in our world through pioneering healthcare. Christians have always been at the forefront of caring and unselfish service. The largest hospital in the world built for Corona patients takes its name from a devoted Anglican, Florence Nightingale, who, following the example of the Good Shepherd, pioneered health care in her age. Another devoted Anglican, Nurse Maude, lies in our cemetery. She too heeded the call of the Good Shepherd and bullied the authorities into providing healthcare for the

victims of the Spanish flu following the First World War. Without her work many hundreds more would have died in Canterbury.

Today that same Shepherd calls you and me. He knows our names. He willingly died for each of us, rescuing us from the storms of life, in order that we might have life and have it abundantly.