

The reflection today is about the gate for the sheep

Music for Gathering from Psalm 23

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Shepherding God,
we come to this place where some many are gathering
some of us know the way here this meeting—
it is now part of our routine and this new way of life,
others need some guidance, encouragement and help.
Jesus, our shepherd, we come to this place
hoping that we will find you here,
and that you will guard the gate for us.
We come to this place of safety and welcome
ready to be fed and watered by our Shepherd King.
Holy Spirit, our inspiration,
we come to this place ready for you
to do what you've always done.
To enliven us with your love,
breathe life into our tired souls,
reinvigorate our purpose
and encourage us on our way.
Forgive us for those times when we have failed to find
our way to you and instead have gone our own way,
and walked away from the flock.
Forgive us for those times
when we have ignored the shepherd's call
and instead behaved in ways that take us off
in a different direction from the rest of the flock.
Lord Jesus,
we know that you are the shepherd of our lives,
always looking out for us, offering protection
from a world that can be a scary place.
Thank you for never giving up on your restless flock.
Shepherd of our lives, hear our prayer.
Amen.

REFLECTION

Doors, gates, windows:
all designed to keep the outside outside
and the inside inside, to keep us safe from harm.
Lord Jesus, you too want to keep us safe,
to shepherd us into your family.
Help us let people know
when we are scared or upset.
Help us to accept the help
of those who loves us:
our families, our friends,
our church family, our community,
Those who care for our health and wellbeing.
Help us to let them protect us. Amen.

GOSPEL READING: **John 10:1-10**

Seeking Safety In The Sheep-Pen

There are a few things about being a sheep that might have relevance this week.

First, in the Biblical world being a sheep was not safe. Thieves and robbers were always on the lookout to take sheep away from the flock. There was safety in numbers when sheep were part of the flock and had the protection of a good shepherd to look after them.

Secondly, sheep of all generations cannot survive long enclosed in a sheep-pen. The food would run out and it could be argued a sheep would go stir-crazy (pen-crazy?) were it not able to roam the fields, climb the hills, go exploring and graze on fresh new patches of grass.

Thirdly, a sheep's life is all primarily about eating: finding sustenance, maintaining strength is the primary objective for a sheep. The same thing, every day.

This elucidation of the life of a sheep might be helpful in exploring this week's strange text.

There is a strong sense that Jesus,
as the gatekeeper to a new life of his creating,

is seeking to welcome people into intimacy both with him and each other.

For the new Christian communities of the early church there was naturally a strong sense that it was safer to be together. The society of the time was a dangerous place and especially for these new communities who were held in suspicion by the authorities and the established faiths.

These words of Jesus provided an assurance that he would see to it that his flock were kept safe.

The worshipping community was like the pen, keeping what was within safe from outside threats.

Which is why we as a church community are now apart, Staying safe means staying at home, but that doesn't mean we can't seek others ways to feel secure in our faith, and in ourselves. I've been doing a bit more reading, and a lot more praying, for example.

SAFE AT HOME ON OUR OWN OR WITH THOSE WE LOVE, 24/7= each brings challenges and joys.

Spiritually there might also be a hint of the emotional grounding a relationship with God brings and how it keeps a person safe against the harm caused by the inevitable ups-and-downs of life. However, We cannot hide the fact that the way this is written there is a strong sense of the people inside

the community enjoying a degree of exclusivity— safer than those on the outside.

We can understand the text in the context of a people believing they were part of something new and under threat;

yet it is important to recognise that such a sense of exclusivity sits in contrast to many other stories in the gospels which tend towards inclusivity.

And, yet, some churches, particularly in certain parts of the States, have assured people that if they come to church,

God will look after them. And where that has happened, there have been significantly more people being infected by the Covid.19 virus, and so my prime concern is your safety, just as a shepherd's prime concern is their sheep's safety.

It is long recognised that a gate is not one way, the point is that you come and go, even if it means opening and closing it with a stick, or look beyond it from a window, or stand at the gate and watch. It's tough just now, because as we all know by now,

Being in the sheep pen is not where you are supposed to be all the time: the sheep need to be let out onto the hills.

So, in our church communities today we must understand that we are not about creating an in-group cutting ourselves off from the world; but instead that we are invited to live with, and interact with, all of the community. Abundant life in our worshipping communities of faith requires that we be around and about for folk, even if it is on the phone or across the garden gate.

Listening out (or in better times, being out) in our communities allows us to know what people's needs are, and we respond to that need. It is interesting to consider that as sheep need freedom away from the pen to graze and find nourishment, so the people of faith find nourishment, not in staying apart from community, but by interacting with it. In some ways this is a juxtaposition to a traditional understanding where sometimes we think (important in- part, but it is not sufficient) of church attendance using language like 'recharging our batteries': receiving from our worship together.

As individuals and as a worshipping community, even in this virtual space, sustenance of the soul is an objective that should be part of our ritual as the people of God as much as eating is a daily ritual for sheep. Check in on one another, and keep safe!

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

Lord, in a world when many search
for the protection you offer,
for a shepherd to welcome them in and to sit by their side,
we bring our prayers for others.

We pray for those who wonder where their next meal will come
from, and we pray for food justice
to become a priority in our world.

We pray for those who wonder
when and if they will ever wake in the morning to peace, and we pray
for an end to fighting
and for the courageous role of peacekeepers.

We pray for those who wonder
about the future of their jobs, and we pray for fair trade practises to
become the norm.

We pray for those who wonder when they might see their family
again, and we pray for those working in isolation so that they can
help to heal and care for others.

We pray for those who wonder
when they might be able to fully support their family, and we pray for
wages that are fair
and able to support individuals and families.

We pray for all those who wonder where their help might come from,
and we pray for communities
that mirror your love and care.

For all looking for the shelter of a shepherd we pray for your
presence to be known. Lord for all these people and situations we
pray.

Blessing

The Shepherd knows us, the Shepherd calls us in and sends us out
to love and serve the waiting world.