

Easter 4: 2nd May 2009

Acts 4:5-12

John10: 11-18

Sheep and Shepherds and Us.

We are used to sheep in this country – there is 30 million of them give or take a million or 2!

This morning's story of Jesus, the noble shepherd, is also very familiar – it is a favourite bible story for Sunday School teachers and used to reassure children that God, and/or Jesus will always watch over them; look after them and keep them safe. (And we all need a bit of this from time to time!)

I've looked at the story from different perspectives and wondered how it can possible speak to us today in our very different world and with our very different experiences of sheep farming and our very different expectations of life. In NZ we do not live in that world of 2000 years ago where there was growing tension between Jesus and his followers, and the religious leadership that were afraid he would spoil the relationship they had as Jews with the Roman rulers...In NZ Christianity is not an emerging and challenging hybrid that needs protection!

I've considered the story from an economic perspective and become uncomfortable with the picture it paints of those who work for wages! Most of us do not own our own businesses, and yet we would consider ourselves conscientious and trustworthy employees. It doesn't help us much from this perspective.

I've looked at it from the familiar leadership perspective that is often used...leadership today is more complex. Most of us do not want to think of ourselves as sheep who will unquestioningly follow a leader and be herded into 'safe places' by a benevolent boss type person...even if 'he' promises to keep us safe from those he determines are our enemies. So I do not think this view helps us much either!

One of my post graduate professors said 'there are some texts in the bible we just have to say are not helpful today' - and this might be one of them!

Do you want to be a sheep and play 'follow the leader' and eventually rounded up for slaughter?

Do you want to be contained and forced to live in close proximity with others not of your choosing?

- Perhaps you would rather be the shepherd, the leader responsible for all those sheep!
- For keeping them safe from predators
- For finding them all enough food and water
- For getting them to market, to the freezing works so your investment or that of your employer can be realised!

To make any sense of this story I have to go back a few verses to the one that reads 'the gate keeper opens the gate for him (the shepherd)'.

Only then can the shepherd do his job! It is the gatekeeper, seldom preached about, who enables the shepherd to do his job! It is the gate keeper, the one who minds the place of transition who helps the shepherd and supports the sheep in their going in and going out - in their return to a place of rest and safety, and their leaving for unfamiliar and scary places, places without boundaries - places where they would have to search for food to sustain themselves.

The gatekeeper stands and watches the going out and the coming in; the scattering and the gathering; the searching and the receiving; the being individual and the becoming community.

Most of us live in this tension; the tension between being an individual and being part of a community. If the balance gets out of kilter we slide from places of health to places where health is compromised. The gatekeeper watches and facilitates this tension, this movement, and can usher one way or another according to need.

The gatekeeper is watchful and attentive.

- Who are the gate keepers for you...watching your health and your need for time alone and time with others, time to make your own discoveries and time to be helped?
- It could be asked whether we have our own internal 'gatekeeper' well developed in order to facilitate our own balance and healing if we get out of kilter!

Jesus says in verse 7 'I am the gate' the very instrument itself that moves this way and that. He adds another image to this already image-laden reading! 'I am the gate' the very way we can move one way or the other as we find a healthy balance in life. Of course we know this is yet another image but we get the picture – of leaving the safe gathering places where we mill around looked after by someone else, and moving into the scary unknown places in search for food. Our life experience tells us that there are often times when we know we have

to leave the safety and security of what is familiar... and move into who knows what?

The recognition that we are all individuals, and yet we live in communities, and, that taking care of both our individual needs and the wellbeing of the community are necessary dynamics that we are all challenged to engage with. This is the Christian Way that we are called to follow. Attending to our own needs and health and attending to the needs of a healthy community.

This week begins the Oxfam 'Fair-trade' promotion with the 'big cup of coffee' and the slogan 'eliminate poverty one cup of coffee at a time'. It is a project aimed at helping coffee growers to get a more just return on their labour by engaging them in the marketing and sale of their own beans instead of simply being locked into handing them over to transnational distributors for the equivalent of less than 3cents a cup that we pay \$3 - \$4 for! St Columba has joined this project and we hope to raise \$50 ...(o get your money ready to buy your coffee this morning!) We are standing with the communities around the world who are calling for fair trade income, so that those not getting a fair return on their labour will be able to, and so be able to feed and house their families. We are expressing our concern for others in our

global village!

This moving in and out, this moving between concern for others and the health of our community, and our personal needs for enough money and enough time and enough love is the balance we are cautioned to attend to this morning. That is we are called to attend to balance and health in our lives if we raise to awareness the gatekeeper and the gate that are tucked quietly within this story of sheep and shepherd to prominence. We need to think differently sometimes about these oh so familiar stories! For they contain more than one truth for us to contemplate.

So I guess the story can still speak to us – that is if we spend enough time sitting with it to discover its hidden message. This is my gift to you this morning...my time struggling on behalf of us all to bring this story, from a different perspective, into our living presence as a community.