

Finding Pasture – John 10:1-11

Just over 10 years ago, on a cold Monday in February, we had the misfortune to be burgled. On the Friday, it had snowed really heavily and all of us – Martyn and I and our two children who were aged 17 and 14 at the time – were treated to a snow day. A snow day, which in the small village where we lived, meant tobogganing most of the day down the hill in a local farmer's field, dodging sheep as you went! They have some great hills in Stamford. On the Saturday, we dug ourselves out of our drive and the small close where we lived, to go and do some shopping. And on the Monday, the snow was thawing sufficiently for us to be able to get to work and school.

Martyn was home first and knew the minute he entered the house that something was wrong. Most of our belongings had been pulled out of drawers and cupboards and it was difficult to see, other than the obvious, what had been taken. As he entered further into the house, he also saw the point of entry. Something very heavy had been used to smash the glass in the patio door in the dining room. And the Sulo bin in the driveway had been used to climb over the back gate into the garden. You could still see their footprints in the snow.

When someone climbs a bin to get into your garden, and uses a patio slab to break and enter through the glass in your door, you know they're up to no good. They haven't knocked on the door, you haven't recognised their voice, and you haven't invited them in.

It's a bit like the sheep rustlers described in our passage today from John's Gospel. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he's up to no good. In contrast, the shepherd walks right up to the gate, the gatekeeper or watchman opens the gate to him and the sheep recognise his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. They follow because they know his voice.

Jesus often talked about shepherds and sheep in his teaching, as these were images that his listeners knew well. But you need to have some sense of the dangers of the desert where most sheep roamed, and the skills of a shepherd, to fully understand themes that would have been instinctive to Jesus and his audience, but are quite alien to us today, particularly in the Fens of Cambridgeshire.

Let's begin with the desert. In Israel, during the bulk of the year, the desert is pretty inhospitable. Water is scarce, food is rare and dangers are everywhere. The eastern deserts of Judea have steep, eroded cliffs that present a drop of a thousand feet in places, so shepherds must have skills and tools or else their sheep will either become prey to the elements or to wild animals.

To lead a flock through a desolate region is therefore serious business. Shepherds commonly carry a 4 or 5ft wooden staff to defend themselves and the sheep from attack. When the flock *is* attacked by wild animals, a good shepherd will never throw a lamb in order to save the flock. He tries to find a sheep pen, much like the one described in our reading, and then stands between the flock and danger, lying down at night across the gateway to block the way in and out.

As sheep pens were used by several shepherds and their flocks, in the morning each shepherd would call his sheep – who recognise his particular voice, and together they would set off on another day's trek. Arab shepherds are well known for having a special devotion to their sheep. They will talk and sing to them, and will often carry a short flute and use a repeated tune so that the flock know what to follow. Jesus notes that the shepherd doesn't simply lead *any* sheep, but rather leads his *own*.

This is well illustrated by a story from the late 1980s during the Palestinian uprising. The Israeli army decided to punish a village near Bethlehem for not paying its taxes. The officer in command rounded up all of the village animals and placed them in a large barbed-wire pen. Later in the week, he was approached by a woman who begged him to release her flock, arguing that since her husband was dead, the animals were her only source of income. He pointed to the pen containing hundreds of animals and laughed, saying that it was impossible that she'd be able to find her animals amongst all the others. She asked that *if* she could in fact separate them herself, would he be willing to let her take them. He agreed. A soldier opened the gate and the woman's son produced a small reed flute. He played a simple tune again and again – and soon sheep heads began popping up across the pen. The young boy continued his music and walked home, followed by his flock of 25 sheep.

So Jesus' listeners would have quickly understood just what a desolate and threatening place the desert could be. They understood the skills and courage needed by a good shepherd. And they understood that if the sheep remained under his leadership, if they recognised his voice – able to tell the right voices

from the wrong ones, they would find safety and would flourish. *'I have come,'* he says, *'that they may have life, and have it to the full.'*

At the moment, it doesn't feel like we're living life to the full. We're prevented from doing many of the things we used to do so freely – go to work, college or school, shop for anything we want, go out for a meal, see family and friends, and leave the house when we want. All of that is curtailed, necessarily so. We've all had to adapt to new patterns of living, new rhythms to our day. Mine involves much more exercise than it did previously as we're using exercise equipment that had been mothballed, gathering dust in the garage, to remain healthy, given we can't go to the gym. We also, weather permitting, go out for a daily walk which we really enjoy. And we're spending much more time together as a couple, which is no bad thing.

Jesus says that those who hear his voice will *'come in and go out and find pasture'*. He modelled a way of life where he regularly sought out quiet, peace and stillness – time to be with God. And for many of us, the lockdown has provided an unexpected opportunity to have time with God – more time than we used to. As the pace of life has slowed, as we're not rushing around quite so much, how do we ensure that we're hearing God's voice?

In our reading, when the sheep are afraid, they listen for the voice of their shepherd who provides reassurance that he's there looking after them. When we're afraid, whose voice do we listen for? There are many voices out there – family, friends, the news, the Internet, social media. Jesus identifies his sheep as being those who hear his voice. How easily do we hear Jesus' voice?

The answer, I'm sure, is to spend time in his company, dwelling on his word by regularly reading our bibles, reminding ourselves of what he said, what he did, and in prayer. We only learn to recognise someone's voice the more time we spend with them, and it's the same with our relationship with Jesus.

So, if you haven't already, can I encourage you to use this time of increased space and time wisely. To reconnect with a God who has never left your side. Maybe, if you're not already, use the daily readings suggested in the pastoral letter and ask God, in prayer, what he wants you to hear from those readings. And remember that, whilst we're not promised that there won't be any dark valleys, we are promised that he is always with us, that goodness and love will always follow us, and that he came to bring us life, and life to the full. Amen.