

“I am the gate” John 10: 1-10

I’m not a betting man but if I was I’d be willing to wager a large sum of someone else’s money on the certainty that everyone here can visualise Jesus as the Shepherd or as the Good Shepherd. Maybe, like this (pic), or this (pic) or this (pic). But I’d wager an even bigger sum that no one here visualises Jesus as a gate, like this (pic), or like this (pic) or even like this (pic). Does that look how you imagined Jesus? I don’t think so. And yet, as we heard in verses 7 and 9, Jesus said “I am the gate”

Maybe it’s a previously unknown fact about artists and believers that they lack imagination when it comes to gates. Or maybe it’s because we have lost the understanding of what a gate represented to the early Greek readers of the Gospel. To them, Jesus referring to himself as a gate would have resonated with their understanding found in Homer and other Greek texts that a heaven above earth was entered through a gate.

And Jesus says a little later on in the gospel “I am the way, the truth and the light”. Jesus is the way...the gate to heaven.

And the Greeks would not have been alone. In the Old Testament there are many references to heavenly gates such as Psalm 118:

“Open to me the gate of righteousness that I may enter through them”.

I suspect the only place of more recent times where references to the so called pearly gates of heaven are found is in the back catalogue of joke books. So without doubt we are more used to hearing stories of the good shepherd and his sheep.

And I have it on very good authority that sheep are not the brightest things on this earth; they seek the security of numbers in a flock and blindly follow the lead of the shepherd.....and the way they do that is by recognising his voice.

Three different shepherds can put their flocks into the same pen but if just one of the shepherds calls his sheep to come out of the pen only his flock will respond; the others will stay put. They have learnt to hear the voice of their shepherd and it is him and him alone that they will follow.

In much the same way as our Christian journey is one of constant learning and recognition, over time we need to come to recognise the voice of God.

And here’s the problem as I see it – many of us today live on the threshold – the gate entrance if you like – of faith; tentative about commitment because we are too full of questions or doubts about what we may be getting ourselves into. We have either yet to learn how to listen to the voice of God or if we have we do not have the mind set or skills to discern what God is saying because of all the noises competing for our attention.

Just think for a moment of the cacophony of sound that surrounds our daily life;  
the radio competing with the dog barking at the plumber  
who is banging his spanner against the boiler casing  
partly blotting out the noise from the gardener's lawn mower  
as the door chimes sound  
at the same time as the telephone rings  
and your better half calls to you to answer both of them  
because she can't leave whipping the cream with an electric whisk  
and the oven timer starts to ping  
as a helicopter flies over.....

What we must do is learn to filter out the noise of the world so that we can hear, so that we can discern what God is saying, to create the perfect ambience to communicate with Him.

Communication may be defined as the process by which one person influences or guides the thought process of another. This might be by talking, as I am doing now, or perhaps by use of the written word. Your thought process will react to what I say or what you might read; but both of these processes have physical limitations because we all have a finite capacity.

On the other hand God is infinite; as we see throughout the Bible, God can guide our thoughts by speaking directly into our heart and mind. The key is to be able to identify when God is speaking to us and more often than not we say that it is the Holy Spirit which is guiding us.

On many, many occasions I have been asked "How can I know if it's God speaking to me or answering my prayers and not just my imagination".

Think for a moment of the occasions when we pick up the telephone and immediately recognise the callers voice. No name, no pack drill, just hi or hello, perhaps, yet we instantly know who is calling. There might be many different reasons why we recognise that particular caller, by the tone of voice, accent, the familiarity of the sound or words used but in each and every case our recognition has gradually developed by increased exposure to their voice, we become more experienced in recognising it.

So my answer to the question is that what is true for recognising a telephone caller is also true in learning to listen to God. Over time we become practiced in recognising and understanding his voice but there is one huge and significant additional factor in this instance and that is that God's voice is unique. It is unique in many different ways, but I think there are three very important ones:

Firstly, it is unique in that God's guidance will always be consistent with Scripture.

Verse 1 "Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit". In other words anyone choosing to follow false gods or false prophets are on a loser straight away.

Or put another way, take care if you hear someone saying "God is telling me you should do this...." when what they really want is to get their own way.

Secondly, God's voice will be unique in that it will be consistent with love, but not the Hollywood depiction of love. In his book 'Les Miserables', I think Vistor Hugo got it exactly right when he wrote "to love another person is to see the face of God". Those words resonate with what is written in 1 John 4 where we are told "God is love".

Thirdly, and most significantly, God's voice is unique because it will speak in ways consistent with his character. Immediately following on from our Gospel reading Jesus says "I am the good shepherd" and this mirrors the old Testament relationship between God and His people symbolised as that of Shepherd and his flock.

Psalm 23 will be familiar to us all.

The story is told of when two members of a bible study group were called upon to recite the twenty third Psalm. The first was an actor steeped in the traditions of oratory and rhyme. He repeated the psalm in a powerful way and when he had finished the group rose as one to their feet, cheered and shouted for an encore, which he duly gave. Again there was rapturous applause at the end.

Then the other man rose. It would be difficult to find a more reserved, mild mannered and shy person and he began in a voice which was only just audible... "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want". When he finished not a single sound came from the group. Instead everyone

sat in a deep mood of contemplation. Then the actor stood up again and said, "I have a confession to make". The difference between the two of us is that I know the Psalm, my friend here knows the shepherd".

And getting to know the shepherd, getting to know Jesus more closely more intimately, more instinctively is what we are trying to teach this year in our sermons and talks.

In 1 Kings we are told that Gods is a "still small voice" and that is why at the end of each talk we enter into a period of silence; to place ourselves into a position where that still small voice might be heard or sensed. It takes time and it takes practice to cut out of our minds all the competing thoughts and voices which constantly bombard us in our daily lives.

And let me be absolutely clear on this point; our attitude here at HTS towards the period of silence each week has changed over recent months and the periods of silence are just that....periods of silence.....

Standing here as often as I have I've noticed far less shuffling about than there used to be; no one now whispers something to their neighbour; it's month's since I last saw anyone looking at their phone or looking around out of boredom. In our own small way we are creating the opportunity where more and more people are slowly but surely learning to hear God's voice. How can I be sure of that?

Remember the question I spoke about earlier? "How can I know if it's God speaking to me or answering my prayers and it's not just my imagination?" Well a number of you have told me just that; that God has spoken into their lives.

Periods of silence where we were asked to reflect on what we had just heard were also an integral part of last month's Lent course which culminated in extended periods of total silence during the Good Friday meditation. A number admitted that these periods of silence took them out of their comfort zone but most encouragingly some said that they grew to sense God's presence.

And that I think brings us neatly to verse 4 "When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice".

How better to end than for all of us in the period of silence which follows pray silently:

"Speak Lord, I am listening"