

11 May 2014 Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 2: 42-47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2: 1-10

John 10:1-10

As we continue in the season of Easter, the readings give us (or invite us into) an encounter and experience with resurrection.

The first reading describes the Apostles experience, it tells of how they lived in the light of Christ's resurrection, and it therefore gives us some insight into the life of the early church. We still continue to hold the threads of that early Church experience. Of course the Church today is very different to that described in Acts, but then so is the world a very different world today. We should therefore expect our theology and our understanding of the Scriptures to also be very different.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. [Isaiah 40:8]
Amongst all the differences that experience encounters there are constants; generations come and go, but eternity remains constant and it is in the frame of eternity that we find life's ever present constants.

Resurrection is an entry point, a doorway, into eternity; a calling out of darkness into "marvellous light".

In the season Easter, we are called into the light; we are invited into a new worldview; we are invited to experience the newness of walking from the tomb of mortality into the garden of eternity. And that invitation is the essence of Christ's teaching and revelation.

Somewhere between the first Easter morning and today we lost sight of eternity's garden and 'resurrection' rather than remaining a verb* became a noun* and adopted the definite article. The revealed insight of "resurrection" became 'the resurrection', a one-off event accomplished by Christ.

What we probably do have in common with the early church on that first Easter morning is a struggle to understand and appreciate the reality of resurrection.

So today as we explore the gospel, we might do so with the aim of discovering what is revealed; and we might look for our insight rather than 'the insight' that belongs to a different church in a different world in a different time and place.

Today's gospel provides a good example for us to test out if our understanding fits with narrative, or does the gospel open us to deeper questions for further reflection.

Verses 1-5:

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

In verse 6 the gospel writer says “*Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*”

So the obvious question is ‘do we understand?’ And those who went to Sunday school most probably can confidently answer, we do!

We can start by naming the correct interpretation for the figures of speech that Jesus provided;

*The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd,
anyone who ... climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.
the sheep hear his voice
He calls his own sheep by name and leads them*

We of course readily understand that Jesus is *the one who enters by the gate*; and Jesus is *the shepherd*.

And the next obvious figure of speech, *the sheep* is of course us, the followers of Jesus. We can leave the thief and the bandit for now.

That was all too easy, and it begs the question when we read verse 6; *Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them*; why did they not understand?

Now let’s pick up the text from verse 7; “*So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate."*”

Again we can leave the thief and the bandit for now; however, these verses must be one of literature’s most unhelpful clarifications; for now we are left with a new question; is Jesus “*the one who enters by the gate*” (v2) or is Jesus *the gate*.” (v9).

Now, perhaps we find ourselves like the first audience; not understanding?

And, if we don’t understand this direct quoted teaching, how on earth will we understand what is being revealed in the whole Easter narrative, how will we understand, and how will we encounter resurrection?

The text does make a lot of sense, but not within the worldview of the early church...

In v7 and v9 Jesus says “*I am the gate*.” And in today’s gospel reading that is his only direct claim. If we were to go one verse further we would become even more confused, for in verse 11 he says: “*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*”

So we are back to square one, is Jesus the gate, or the shepherd?

Are we to default to the position of the psalmist?

“*The Lord is my shepherd: therefore can I lack nothing.*”

These simple questions, provides us with a very rich source of reflection, and that is made even richer when we read them in the light of resurrection, and with an appreciation that Jesus was not revealing himself, but rather was revealing ourselves.

There are 43 verses in the Old Testament which mention “shepherd”, it was a common reality and a common figure of speech in the Old Testament.

Now in the gospel of John we have the writer seeking to provide a new understanding, and the same figure of speech is being used, but with a new understanding, for the world has changed...

“*The Lord is my shepherd*” is not an affirmation that Jesus is Lord and the shepherd of his people; rather it is an Old Testament figure of speech that understands God as the director or conductor of creation...

Jesus, *the good shepherd* identifies “the Green man walking”, those who have come through *the gate* of resurrection are the shepherds of creation.

The psalm hints at the process: “*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil*”; identifies with resurrection; and “*I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever*” identifies with eternity.

Jesus says “*I am the gate*” I am the opening, the enlightenment, the light in the darkness, and if we can enter that gate, we are both shepherd and sheep.

As shepherd we have a good example to help us to appreciate the shepherding that is required of us: “*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*”

Those who continue to see “*The Lord is my shepherd*” are left standing at a street corner in Berlin, watching the green man lit up, but locked into the same place that they were when the red man was alight.

Those who see the green man walking as an invitation to move forward, enter into a New creation, they are themselves the green man walking...

And the image on the front of the service sheet this week makes clear that we never walk alone..

Resurrection is the opening to a different world view, and engaging that new world view we see ourselves, each other and God in a new light.

Jesus says “*I am the gate*”, are we going to accept the obvious invitation.

*A **verb**, from the Latin *verbum* meaning *word*, is a word (part of speech) that in syntax conveys an action (*bring, read, walk, run, learn*), an occurrence (*happen, become*), or a state of being (*be, exist, stand*).

***Nouns** are a part of speech typically denoting a person, place, thing, animal or idea.