

## Sermon Archive 150

Sunday 7 May, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: John 10: 1-10

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



### A poetic reflection by Andrew King

#### PASTURE

There is a place we can find, a good place  
like quiet meadows where flowers spread,  
like green grasses by gentle streams;  
a place where the heart feels nourished,  
where the mind is hopeful, unhurried,  
where the spirit is glad and at peace.  
We'll name this place fulfillment,  
we'll name it healing and thankfulness,  
we'll name this good place *pasture*  
for there we seek to feed.  
And there is a voice we can hear that calls us,  
a gentle voice, melodious,  
a voice like songbirds and laughter,  
like a mother comforting her children,  
like a shepherd calling his sheep.  
We'll name this voice acceptance,  
we'll name it mercy and forgiveness,  
we'll name it the voice of God's love,  
inviting us gently to feed.  
It invites us to enter pasture  
when we think we're too hurting to listen,  
too angry or grieving or fearful  
to hear the voice that calls us to peace.  
It invites us to enter pasture  
when we're sure we're too busy to listen,  
too burdened or worried or pressured  
to hear the voice that calls us to peace.  
It says: Come in and go out and find pasture.  
It says: We are safe with the shepherd of all sheep.  
It says: Meadows await us, in this moment.

It says: Rest in love. Where you are. Joyfully feed.

-ooOoo-

The Jesus presented by “John the gospel writer” is using metaphors again! The people hardly ever understand him when he does that, so goodness knows why he persists! In order to give us a helping hand, let’s try, in an unpoetic way, to sort out “who stands for what”.

The sheep are the people - in general, ordinary, average, everyday people - made in the glorious image of God. Do they have minds of their own, or are they inclined just to follow the woolly one at the head of the queue? That’s a detail surplus to requirements, so we’ll leave it for later.

The pasture? The pasture is that wonderful place of nurturing, that state of being so beautifully imagined in the poem by Andrew King. It’s what Jesus later calls “abundant life”. It’s where we need to be.

The gate through to the pasture is Jesus. Jesus is opening a way for the sheep to get to the pasture. The gate’s already in place. It’s already there for the sheep to go through. The gate’s not going anywhere.

The last ones on the list of Dramatis Personae are a couple of shepherds. Moving around the gate, maybe sometimes opening the gate, maybe sometimes closing it, maybe sometimes speaking to the sheep, maybe sometimes herding them in particular directions, generally claiming some sense of ownership, they’re certainly managing the fate of the sheep.

Jesus observes that one of the shepherds is keen to use the gate - to lead the sheep through it, into nourishment and safety. This shepherd speaks to the sheep, and the sheep hear in the speaking, a familiar, reassuring voice. It all feels right, he knows that his will is being done, and as day follows night, the speaking leads the sheep to a place that is good.

There’s another shepherd. Well, is he really a shepherd? He’s presenting himself as one. The sheep are being encouraged to respond to him as he is one - but there’s something not quite right with his voice. (Are you listening carefully to the voice?) Because Jesus is saying, in his little word-picture of sheep and shepherds, that the not-quite-right voice, ultimately, is going to be identified as the voice of a stranger - indeed a stranger who, at heart, is a thief. So listen hard, you sheep, to the voice of those claiming shepherd status. If you listen hard, maybe you’ll uncover the voice of a thief.

*Jesus used this figure of speech with the people, but they didn’t understand him. [John 10:6]*

There we go! Just as we feared, metaphors are leaving the people behind. Jesus is going to have to be more direct. Let me be direct.

In France a now-familiar drama is being acted out - culminating this weekend in a Presidential election. One candidate is presenting herself as a shepherd for the nation. She knows the sheep are stressed and frightened. She knows they long for peaceful pasture. (Of course they do! Many times recently they've suffered awful expressions of destruction, killing and the stealing of life.) And she, who would be the shepherd of the nation, already describes for the people the gate through which they have to go. The people need to move in a particular direction - that of closing the gate to others, of reducing immigration, refusing refugees, restricting religious and cultural expression. To win peace for the people, the people need to close their hearts to others who are different.

At least twice before lately, we have seen that this voice resonates well with people who are frightened or frustrated - haven't we? This sort of shepherding has huge power to persuade. But Jesus says "listen carefully to the voice". Is it really the voice of someone giving abundant life? Is it a voice that's been formed from the pleasant pasture? Is it a voice that our deeper selves (made in God's image) find familiar - like it calls us by name, opening the gate to wholeness, naming the One who made us in love?

Listening to the Dutch equivalent of the far-right, xenophobic voice being spoken in France, the people of the Netherlands recently determined that it was *not* the voice of the good shepherd. It was the voice of a thief - who'd come, in Jesus' words, "only to steal and kill and destroy". The Dutch people chose to respond to a different shepherd. It will be interesting to see how things go for Holland, and also to see how things unfold in France.

Closer to home, right here in Christchurch, as part of a mission discernment process, the Knox flock pondered the sociological fact that fewer people than ever before now are willing to listen to the voice of the church. Whereas once, when the institutional church spoke, people listened, nowadays people yawn. Something has happened with the speaking of the church, such that the sheep are not hearing something from the pleasant pastures.

One contributor to our "church-and-people disconnection" conversation noted:

*"Many people feel the church is irrelevant to their lives. This is probably [. . . because . . .] most publicity about Christianity seems to be headlines about e.g. "Bishop" Tamaki and his church, the exclusive Gloriavale community, extremists in the USA, designation by churches of the LGBTQ community as lesser beings, etc etc. The impression that one*

*must ignore scientific knowledge to become a believer also contributes to a spurning by many, I think."*

Another conversation participant said:

*"Because the church is conservative and so far behind society in accepting changes in laws, e.g. homosexual law reforms, it looks as if we are out of touch with the real world. People do their own thing and churches appear irrelevant."*

That's what our people have said.

While in Europe people may not be listening carefully enough to the voices they hear, it could be that here, in our land, the sheep are listening very carefully indeed - and simply hearing the voice of an institution that's wandered away from abundant life. Maybe there's something in the institution's voice that deserves not to be heard. Maybe Jesus is *right* that the sheep understand what they hear! This is the other side of Jesus' metaphor of shepherds and sheep - our need not only to listen critically to the voices we hear out there, but also to listen to what we, ourselves, are saying in Christ's name - sheep stealing or abundant life?

-ooOoo-

There is a place we can find, a good place  
like quiet meadows where flowers spread,  
like green grasses by gentle streams;  
a place where the heart feels nourished,  
where the mind is hopeful, unhurried,  
where the spirit is glad and at peace.

And there is a voice we can hear that calls us,  
a gentle voice, melodious,  
a voice like songbirds and laughter,  
like a mother comforting her children,  
like a shepherd calling his sheep.

-ooOoo-

Behold, the gate is open; the shepherd is calling. We keep a moment of humble listening.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.