

## EVERYTHING SHEEPSHAPE

John 10:1–21, 24–30

In the first five verses of this chapter Jesus tells a parable. It has a rural setting. It's night time. There's a huge flock of sheep. They're very valuable and they're safely tucked up in their large walled enclosure. There's a watchman by the gate, guarding the flock. Remember, they're very valuable.

Now something is happening. Round the back of the enclosure, in the deep shadows, someone is climbing the wall, making his way in to the sheep. Who is he? Not the watchman. He's by the gate. Not the owner. He's safely tucked up in his bed. It's a thief. He's stealing the sheep.

Now the picture changes. It's daylight. Another man is approaching the sheep pen. He walks right up to the gate and the watchman lets him in. Moments later he walks out again with all the sheep following behind him. The incredible thing is that although it's a huge flock, he knows all the sheep. There's one wandering off. He calls out its name and it comes back. He's got a name for all of them and they each respond to his voice.

Another man is travelling nearby. He's fascinated by this scene and so *he* calls out the name of one of the sheep. But there's no response. They don't recognise the voice of a stranger. In fact, they run away from him.

This is like so many of Jesus' parables. On the surface it's a simple story but behind it there's a deeper meaning, and his listeners didn't get the meaning. So Jesus went on to draw it out.

The main point is that there is only one shepherd. And when he comes there is clear evidence that he is the one. But no one got the point. Verse 6: 'They did not understand what he was telling them.'

Jesus went on to make the image sharper and more obvious. He shifted the focus from the shepherd to the gate.

Verses 7–10. 'Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'"

The picture of the gate suggests three things.

### 1. Entry

Verse 9: 'Whoever enters...' The only way to enter the kingdom of God is through Jesus. In another of the great 'I am' sayings of Jesus in John chapter 14 verse 6 he says, 'I am the way ... No one comes to the Father except through me.' The Bible describes our natural condition as sinners, lost, outsiders. We need to come in from the cold, in to the warmth of forgiveness and peace with God. There is only one way, and that is through faith in Jesus.

We need to remember that the door which allows entry also prevents entry. The door is open now. We have no guarantee of tomorrow. 'One door and only one and yet its sides are two; inside and outside, on which side are you? One door and only one and yet its sides are two. I'm on the inside, on which side are you?'

## 2. Safety

'Whoever enters through me will be saved.' For the sheep it was a dangerous world. Jesus refers to three dangers: the thief, the hired hand, and the wolf.

The thief, verse 10. 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.' There are destructive forces in the world, people motivated by hatred, people who hate God and hate us. The thief takes us from the one we rightfully belong to. The thief is an out and out enemy.

Then there's the hired hand. Verse 12: 'The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away.' The hired hand is only interested in himself and the money he can make. He's not an enemy of the sheep, but for him they're just a way of earning a living, no more. Any sign of trouble and he's off! Verse 13: 'The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.'

Then there's the wolf. Verse 12: 'The wolf attacks the flock and scatters it.' The wolf wants to destroy the sheep. In many parts of the world today Christians are facing intimidation and violent persecution.

There's an additional danger, and that's the fact that the sheep *is* a sheep, and has a tendency to go astray, to get lost. Even without the predators out there it's at risk, but they make it even more vulnerable.

The sheep has no natural defences, no fangs, no claws, no shell, no speed. It needs the protection of the shepherd. Jesus said, 'Whoever enters through me will be saved.'

## 3. Liberty

Verse 9: 'He will come in and go out, and find pasture.' The sheep are in a pen but the pen is not a prison. Their liberty is assured.

The thief will get in, but not by the gate. The thief will take them out, but not by the gate, and not to lead them to pasture. In our time there has been a lot of talk about freedom, but the freedom which the devil offers is not true freedom: the freedom to take drugs, the freedom to sleep around, the freedom to be totally selfish. All this actually robs you of your freedom.

There is safety and security only by going in and out of the gate. And Jesus says, 'I am the gate.' Only Jesus can really set you free.

In verse 11 Jesus takes a slightly different meaning from the parable. 'I am the good shepherd.' The image of the gate and the image of the shepherd may be more closely connected than it appears. In the middle east a sheepfold would often not have a gate as we understand it. There would just be a gap, but the shepherd himself would lie across the gap to make the gate.

For the good shepherd, the safety of the sheep comes first. He's not bothered about himself. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Verses 14–18: 'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me — just as the Father knows me and I know the Father — and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life — only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.'

In these verses there are two developments. We have been introduced to a variety of

characters: the thief, the watchman, the stranger, the hired hand, the wolf. Now all these characters disappear and we are left with just the shepherd and the sheep. That's the first development, and it's an important one. This morning the Lord wants to bring you to that place where it's just you and him.

But there's another development. For the first time in verse 15 the Father appears. We see that the Shepherd is also a Son and his work is linked to his relationship with his Father. The Father loves him and has given him authority to do two things: to lay down his life. – no one takes it from him – to lay down his life, and to take it up again.

Furthermore, there are 'other sheep' (verse 16). When Jesus spoke these words to Jewish people he was thinking of the other nations of the world. The love of the Good Shepherd is not exclusive but all-inclusive. We are those 'other sheep' Jesus was talking about, and there are still others whom he wants to reach.

In the Scripture Union material for all ages they suggest a way of reading John chapter 10 verses 7 to 16. Every time the word 'sheep' occurs everyone says, 'That's us,' and every time the word 'shepherd' or 'gate' is mentioned everyone says, 'That's Jesus.'

We're not going to do that this morning. If the children were here it would be a good idea but I don't want to embarrass you. What I do want to do is turn round what Jesus says and make it more personal, make it you and Jesus rather than sheep and shepherd. The first thing to grasp is that you are a sheep. Get yourself into that mind set and we're going to meditate on the implications of that. You are a sheep and Jesus is your shepherd, the good shepherd.

You listen to his voice. You belong to Jesus. He calls you by name. He leads you out. When he has led all of you out he goes on ahead of you. You follow him because you know his voice. You will never follow a stranger. You will run away from a stranger because you do not recognise a stranger's voice. Jesus is the gate for you. You did not listen to thieves and robbers who came before. If you enter through Jesus you will be saved. You will come in and go out and find pasture. You will have life and have it to the full. Jesus lays down his life for you. You don't belong to the hired hand. He doesn't own you. When the hired hand sees the wolf he abandons you and runs away. Then the wolf attacks and scatters you. The hired hand cares nothing for you. Jesus knows you and you know Jesus. Jesus lays down his life for you. Jesus has other sheep that are not of your sheep pen. He must bring them also. You listen to his voice. He knows you and you follow him. He gives you eternal life. You will never perish and no one can snatch you out of his hand. His Father has given you to him. His Father, who has given you to him, is greater than all. No one can snatch you out of his Father's hand. He and the Father are one.