

# Good Shepherd Sunday

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John 10.1-10, Acts 2.42-47, Psalm 23, 1 Peter 2.1-10

I used to take a bus from Jerusalem down to Jericho twice a week to teach in one of the refugee camps. On the way down, the bus would stop to pick up Bedouin children who were going to school. There was no bus stop; just a few kids waiting by the roadside. After school, they'd be dropped back there – in the middle of nowhere, it seemed.

I got to know some of these Bedouin families. Their camp in the Judean wilderness, was tucked into a wadi – a dry river bed – not far from the Jericho road. Bedouin families live in rambling, flat-roofed tents – tents made of goatskins. Several families live in an area, so there are quite a few tents. And each family has its own flock of sheep and goats, which are the family's bank, deli, clothing and housing material. During the day, the younger children lead the flocks about the countryside to look after them as they graze. There are no fences. But at night, the various families' flocks are brought home, and all penned together in a sort of stockade.

In the camp I knew, the families had built a thorny fence across the entrance to a blind gully that opened into their wadi. It provided a secure stockade for everyone's flocks. With tall rocky walls on three sides and the thorn fence across the opening, only one person was needed to guard it at night – sleeping across the gate to guard everyone's flocks from wild animals and thieves. Jesus called himself that gate. ... In the morning each family would send their children to the stockade. The guard would open the gate, and the children would each call out to their family's sheep and goats who'd come out to them. The boys and girls called, and from the huddle of mixed flocks, their family's animals came out to

them. They knew their shepherds' voices. And the children would stay with their flock throughout the day.

I remember that when I read what Jesus said, The shepherds call their own sheep by name and lead them out. 4When they've brought out all their own, they go ahead of them, and the sheep follow because they know their voices. It's such a rich image! I wish we could come up with its equal for our time. But I can't think of anything that speaks so eloquently to these people's – or our – life experience.

So let's stay with the original. We know who the Good Shepherd is, and we know who we are. God has sent Jesus, his Son, to call us out of the blind gully. No food there, so a sort of valley of the shadow of death. As we follow his call, he leads us out to the life-giving places, green pastures, still waters. The Bedouin people, living so much like they did in biblical times, embody the beauty of this image with their good, strong community; one marked by co-operation; mutual support, trust, and of course, extraordinarily generous hospitality – you spread a table before me.

This Easter season reminds us as Christians that the bad shepherds Jesus warns us against don't have the final say. Not even death could stop our Shepherd rising up to call us from the shadows and nurture us. And these Bedouin families – now so dreadfully oppressed across the Middle East and North Africa – are living witness to the fact that people do choose to live as Good Shepherd communities no matter what. It's wonderful what such good, kind people still achieve against all odds.

This teaching speaks to us directly. It addresses our prayer. In our collect prayer today, we all asked God to send us as shepherds to rescue the lost, to heal the injured and to feed one another. It's a prayer that expresses God's heart for all his little ones. We can trust that God will honour this prayer. And we can also be quite sure that we who've prayed it

will be called to be the instruments of God's answer. At our baptism, our call is clear. Jesus hands are now our hands; hands to rescue the lost, to heal the injured and feed one another. We are Christ's body now.

We saw this erupt today in the earliest Christian Church. We read about it in Acts. 44All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread [from house to house] and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

How hard is it to sell things – sheep and goats and the sort of stuff one accumulates – sell it and use it to look after strangers? No more now than it was then. That's what the earliest disciples did, and they transformed lives – transformed their world. We all asked God to send us as shepherds to rescue the lost, to heal the injured and to feed one another. Doing this more than almost anything else binds people together in bonds of love; crossing racial and cultural divides.

Jesus said I am the gate for the sheep ... Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. What does that mean for us now? Where do we fit in? It seems pretty clear that we – we who each Sunday call ourselves the Body of Christ in this present time – that we are called to embody the roles he names in this teaching. We are any and all of these at different times – shepherd, guard, sheep and goats, the lost, the injured, the hungry, the gate of safety.

Jesus has entrusted you and me with all this – work, growth, compassion, courage, and responsibility. He's shown us the cost of all this, and yet in the hope his rising inspires in us, we've asked to be part of it all. He will honour our

prayer.

May Jesus in his kindness strengthen us to be his Body in this, our time. Amen