

Sermon: 2020/05/03 (Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A) - Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; & John 10:1-10_BTR

Repeatedly in the gospels, (time and time again), Jesus speaks parabolically about Christians being "sheep."

And we find Him doing so this morning.

We're so accustomed to the metaphor that, more than likely, we don't stop to consider that it isn't an especially flattering comparison.

I mean, let me put it this way:

picture yourself sitting in an American "Indian" "sweat-lodge."

You're there pursuing some *misguided* adventure of so-called "self-discovery."

Or, perhaps, on a corporate team-building weekend.

You went paint-balling and paragliding.

You did the bungee-jump and the rock-climbing.

And all the other stuff advertised in the brochure.

But this is it, now:

Sat in a tight circle in a tent of animal-skins.

Making "a leap into the dark."

It's unbearably hot and claustrophobic:

The fire in the middle is blazing.

And then, with a sudden flourish from a hidden pocket, your host throws into the flames a handful of hallucinogenic herbs: *Whoosh!*

You blackout.

Coming round later, slumped against another tourist on whose shoulder you drooled as you slept, you discover you've been assigned your so-called "spirit-animal."

Carved in traditional style into a large pebble.

It's your totem; your emblem.

It tells the world who you are, (*supposedly*).

Like a primitive, prehistoric Myers-Briggs-personality test.

And the chap on whom you "drooled"?

He got an eagle: noble, far-sighted; sleek and fearsome.

On the other side, his wife was determined to be a boar: tough and brave.

Another person in the party is said to be a mountain lion: fierce and agile.

But you?

...you're a sheep.

And so am I.

And everybody else, apparently.

At least, to be clear, those are "sheep" who respond to the *true* shepherd's voice - *Jesus*; His call to repent: to be 'free from sins...[and] live for righteousness', as

Peter puts it in today's epistle: [1 Pet. 2:24].

The Israelites, of course, didn't share our particular, cultural ideas about sheep. Though it is certain, sheep being everywhere pretty much the same, that no one has ever attributed much wisdom or majesty to it as beast.

But we must be careful not to presume what the sheep meant back *then*.

We must "be careful" not to underestimate its importance to the Jewish people of Roman *Palestine*.

Its *centrality* to *their* life:

for, after oxygen, water and wheat, it was...*the sheep*.

Shearing, weaving and selling its wool was *the heart* of the region's economy.

And eating its meat and cheese and drinking its milk were the main components in their diet, excepting, of course, the olive and the grape. [n.1]

Indeed, I think that, when we look closely at the Hebrew Scriptures - that's the Old Testament - in particular, we find the sheep to be a something of an important signifier about the overall divine plan; that it is a hint; a "glimpse" *into* the "meta narrative."

Like a canary in a coal-mine, but in a positive way:

the canary's role is to die from inhaling poisonous gases in the shaft before they reach a level of toxicity that would kill the miners.

Sheep, however, in the holy, *inspired* text, seem to possess a subtle relationship to the promise of Heaven;

it functions as something of a symbol for "paradise" and better-life-beyond.

Consider, after its initial appearance in *Genesis* 4, when it is mentioned in connection with Abel (the murderer) - an occurrence which is the exception to my argument, it next appears - the sheep - in chapter 12 with Abraham, among a list of the patriarch's animals: [v.16].

And they are given to him as a gift from the ruler of Egypt, "Pharaoh."

Up to *that* point, Abraham had only *unspecified* 'possessions': [12:5].

Now, we likely imagine him to have had flocks all along.

We picture him as the atypical nomad, don't we?

With donkeys, camels and so forth.

Extensive herds of them.

And it *is* true that, *later*, he is described as being 'very rich in livestock': [13:2].

But should we assume, then, that he had such from the beginning?

I think not.

Indeed, you might say that it was Pharaoh's gift which put Abraham on the trajectory that led to his eventual prosperity.

So, suddenly, Abraham is the owner of all these new sheep and what do they need?

'Pasture'.

Which there wasn't much of in heavily-urbanised, Nilotic, *crowded* Egypt, but, of course, "Egypt" was *not* where he was *supposed* to be:

He was *meant* to be in Canaan;

that was the land promised to him by God.

And, *overwhelmingly*, in the Bible, *almost without any exception whatsoever(!)*,

"pasture" - that word - is mentioned in the Bible in connection with *that* special place, the land flowing with milk and honey;

that *unique* place which, *clearly*, is supposed to prefigure - be a taste of the final, new creation.

Canaan was a rather *obvious* temporary "stand in," an earthly substitute; a *signpost* pointing the way toward God's "End Game" for penitent, redeemed humanity.

So, to summarise my sermon so far:

in the Scriptures, more often than not, "sheep" = "pasture" = "Canaan" = The-Kingdom-to-Come.

Thus, we find Jesus saying about Himself that He is both the shepherd *and* the gate:

a confusion that can *only* be resolved when we put on our trinitarian "lenses."

And the thing He gives access to in *both* roles, but in very different ways, is a 'sheepfold'.

But no ordinary 'sheepfold'!

Oh no.

Notice that the "sheep" who respond to Jesus' voice don't find themselves, as you might expect, trapped; hemmed in by the sheepfold described.

Caged.

They 'go in' and then, immediately, they 'go out and find pasture'.

It is as if this so-called, *metaphorical* "sheepfold" has no back to it.

And this, besides, Jesus' *two* roles - as shepherd and gate - is what is confusing to the disciples and, perhaps, you and me.

Because the point of a sheepfold is to trap sheep in one place - for their protection, yes: against predators.

In other words, let's face it, sheepfolds are, essentially, for "social distancing" - for "social distancing" between the sheep and the lions and the wolves and bears who'd eat them.

But, *as we are learning too well*, "social distancing" - imposed and dictated - "gets old" pretty fast; its novelty soon wears off.

And the sheepfold that Jesus describes (in His parable), however, turns out to be like Doctor Who's "Tardis": surprisingly roomy, right?

Because that's what 'pasture' is:

wide, open space - "wide, open space" for romping around and joie de vive.

But an even better analogy, perhaps, than the "Tardis" is this:

the wardrobe from C. S. Lewis', *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

The Pensey children - the main characters, refugees from the blitz in London, are chased into a wardrobe that turns out to be a 'gate' to a whole, new *amazing* world:

I quote -

'There was nothing Lucy liked so much as the smell and feel of fur. She immediately stepped into the wardrobe and got in among the coats and rubbed her face against them, leaving the door open, of course, because she knew that it is very foolish to shut oneself into any wardrobe. Soon she went further in and found that there was a second row of coats hanging up behind the first one. It was almost quite dark in there and she kept her arms stretched out in front of her so as not to bump her face into the back of the wardrobe. She took a step further in - then two or three steps - always expecting to feel woodwork against the tips of her fingers. But she could not feel it. "This must be a simply enormous wardrobe!" [she] thought'.^[n.2]

And so it is! - 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.' the Savior reassures us: [\[Jn. 14:2\]](#).

This is the thrilling prospect that the Easter season brings into sharper focus for the Church.

Footnotes:

1. See: Safrai, Ze'ev (1994), *The Economy of Roman Palestine*, London; New York, N. Y.: Routledge, 93-107.
2. HarperCollins, 6.