

John 10:1-10 May 15th 2011

One more step along the world I go,
one more step along the world I go;
from the old things to the new
keep me travelling along with you.

You may know that old hymn which is often chosen at weddings. When I was younger we used a hymn book called 'Ancient and Modern' – I have heard some younger people call it, somewhat flippantly, 'Ancient and Ancient'.

From the old to the new – today's gospel is concerned with travelling from the old to the new: the old ways of Judaism, are not so much replaced, as given meaning by the new ways that Jesus is offering.

John's gospel has shown how some of the old Jewish festivals are to be given a different meaning because of the 'new' ways of Jesus. Passover is no longer needed in the same way because Jesus says, 'I am the bread of life' offering us spiritual freedom from slavery. The feast of the tabernacles, the time when Jews made a pilgrimage to the Temple to thank God for the harvest is no longer needed because Jesus, as the 'living water,' offers eternal life. Now in today's reading, the festival of the dedication becomes understood in a different way because Jesus says 'I am the gate'. Jesus has already claimed the title 'I am' in John's gospel – a title which all the listeners knew belonged to God – the name given to Moses, from the burning bush: 'Tell them 'I am' sent you'. Here Jesus is claiming to be God.

For John, Jesus speaks of three old ways which are transformed into three new ways through him.

Firstly, Jesus talks about some sheep or people who enter the sheepfold by climbing in over the sides rather than entering through the gate. To understand this reference we need to know that the festival of dedication was the time when Jews remembered the Temple being cleansed and re-opened after Antiochus the fourth desecrated it and persecuted some of the Jews. You may recall that he ordered the sacrifice a pig on the altar in the Temple, allowed blood to run all over the floor and he forced Jews to worship idols rather than God. Jews still celebrate the festival of Hanukkah to this day when the 8 branched candlestick is lit for 8 days to

remember how long a small amount of oil lasted as they cleaned up the Temple. The ones entering the sheepfold by climbing in over the sides are the High Priests. They followed and obeyed Antiochus the fourth rather than opposing his persecution of the Jews. They didn't stand up for what was right and yet there they are still worshipping in the Temple as though nothing had happened. It's a little like being in a traffic queue on a two lane road where one lane is closed and a driver races past you in the empty lane and then cuts in further on, so that they don't have to queue like everyone else. It can make us angry or self righteous – neither of which is at all healthy for our spirituality. The High Priests were seen to have behaved in such a way at the time of Antiochus the fourth. The Jews response to such High Priests might have been similar to our reaction today when we hear of a GP, teacher or priest who commits a crime against children but is still allowed to practice in their profession. The High Priests are still practising in the Temple but with Jesus' arrival, it is no longer acceptable – to follow Jesus is to take on the new way and everyone must enter through the gate alone: there must be no hypocrisy. At the time of the festival of the rededication, the readings heard in the synagogues included Ezekiel chapter 34. That chapter speaks of the incompetencies of the current shepherds as leaders and God's determination to rescue the sheep, to look after them and for God, then to become the rightful and good shepherd. Jesus' reference to poor leadership did not go unnoticed – no wonder later in the chapter the Jewish leaders seek to stone Jesus. By claiming to be the good shepherd, Jesus is implying not only that those around him are *not* good shepherds but that he alone is from God.

Firstly then, the old ways are to be transformed: everyone will enter the sheepfold only through the door, there will be no hypocrisy; Jesus is now the king, the rightful way to know God.

Secondly, the old practice where the priests were permitted to enter through the Temple Door and then into the Holy of Holies in the Temple is to be changed. Jesus is now the gate or door - *he* is the entrance to the Holy of Holies. He says, 'I am the gate' an echo of Psalm 118 verse 29 which says, 'This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it'. The holy of holies was where God's glory or Shekinah, was to be found – the same glory that dwelt in the tabernacle in the wilderness. Jesus is now the gate and the gatekeeper for the righteous: the one who opens and closes the gate for us to enter into God's presence. This gate,

should we choose to pass through it, leads to the sheepfold – to safety and to salvation.

Thirdly, we hear about the shepherd of these sheep. This Shepherd comes with a new gift. He is not like those leaders who come ‘only to steal, kill and destroy’. He is not like the Jewish leaders who associated themselves with Antiochus the fourth, this shepherd seeks to put others before himself. He will protect his sheep. The sheepfold would have had an entrance that a shepherd would lie down to sleep in front of at night time in order to block the way of any predators and so protect the sheep by becoming the gate. The good shepherd protects the sheep with his own life, as Jesus did, and offers the gift of life in all its abundance.

This is a new order for God’s people, the offer of new life.

Three ways then that we understand Jesus takes us from the old ways to the new, ushering in a new way of life. The listeners, at the time, did not understand Jesus’ imagery of the gate so we may be excused for struggling to apply it to our own lives today. Perhaps there are two questions for us. How do we find the gate today? And once in the sheepfold, what difference does it make to us?

Firstly, how do we find the gate? One thing seems to be clear – the sheep know the shepherd’s voice as they are called by name to enter or to leave the sheepfold. The shepherd can, of course, be found in many ways but one of the ways involves listening. We need to listen, to make space to hear the shepherd, to hear God. Many people have commented, ‘I listened to God and heard nothing’. Listening is harder than we might expect. (I could say listening is harder than it sounds). If any of you have attended the diocesan, or any, listening course you will know how difficult it is to listen to other people, let alone to God. Mother Mary Clare said, ‘Listening is no passive affair, a space where we happen not to be doing or speaking..... Listening is a conscious, willed action, requiring alertness and vigilance, by which our whole attention is focussed and controlled. ...Listening is the aspect of silence in which we receive the commissioning of God.’ And so we try to listen in God’s silence for guidance, we listen to other people as they are used by God to call us, we listen in God’s noise to discern and pinpoint the calling of our name. If we are to find the sheepfold/the place where Jesus is calling us or

to know when to leave or enter the sheepfold, then firstly we need to hear the voice of Jesus calling us: Mary, John, Susan, Harold, Julia, Frank and so on.

And here we all are, we *have* listened, we have heard our name and we have made our way through the winding entrance to this cathedral, then through the door by the cloister (and that journey in itself can be a challenge!) and we have gathered together to be the sheep in this fold. So what difference does it make to us? How are *we* changed from the old to the new?

Once we have entered the gate, once we have stooped down and peered through the dark door into the empty tomb and once we have understood as we gaze upon the pieces of linen that Jesus 'is not there, he has risen' then we become a resurrection people. We become like the early Christians in Acts. Our actions will show others that we are a new people. They will see a people who devote themselves to breaking bread and praying, a people who experience awe and signs of God, a people who give and share possessions, a people who give to those in need, a people who have generous hearts and a people who daily welcome more Christians in. That is the evidence for others that we have heard the shepherd's voice, that we have left the old behind and are in the sheepfold living life differently from others.

The words on the clock in the north transept by Henry Twells speak of a person travelling through life. The first part says:

When as a child I laughed and wept – time crept

When as a youth I dreamed and talked – time walked

When I became a full grown man – time ran

And later as I older grew – time flew

Soon I shall find while travelling on – time gone

As we journey through time, we pray we can all say that, 'yes we heard the voice of Jesus our shepherd and king', 'yes we travelled through the gate in and out of the sheepfold', 'yes we reshaped the old life and travelled to the new' and 'yes we were a resurrection people' who enjoyed and celebrated and will celebrate life in all its abundance. Amen

