

+WEEKLY REFLECTION

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Jesus our Shepherd – Winter and Summer

John 10:1-10

In winter, in the Middle East, it is too cold for sheep to stay outside at night.

So, in Jesus' society, all the shepherds used to bring their sheep back down from the hillside as night fell, to a communal building.

Everyone herds their sheep in there. One person – the gatekeeper – stays awake overnight, to guard the sheep from thieves. In the morning, each shepherd comes and collects their sheep. As you appear at the door and call your flock, they will follow you back out to the hills to feed.

This is the picture, rooted in everyday life, that Jesus paints for us in the first half of our Bible reading. It is a beautiful picture of his relationship with his people. He is like the shepherd and we are like his flock. He knows us each by name, and (as the Confirmation Service says) he calls us by name.

In this picture, there is an invitation, isn't there? Jesus invites us to get to know him better and to trust him and follow him, just as the sheep know, trust and follow their shepherd.

In the second part of our reading, Jesus draws for us a second picture rooted in everyday life. Now it is summer: warm enough for the flocks to stay out on the hills overnight. As the light fails, each shepherd leads his flock into a temporary pen on the hillside. The pen is made from rocks, with a single opening.

When all are safely gathered in for the night, the shepherd himself lies across the opening, completing the circle and placing his own body between his sheep and danger. If robbers or wild animals come to attack the sheep, the shepherd – who has made himself 'the gate for the sheep' – will give his life to save them.

As he draws this second picture, Jesus is pointing to Good Friday: the day when he gave his life to save his people. Jesus is the shepherd who makes himself the gate for the sheep: 'whoever enters by me will be kept safe', he promises.

So, we hear a second invitation. Jesus invites us to discover for ourselves, in following him, that he is 'the gate' to a new life made so secure that nothing can snatch us away.

Lord Jesus, our Shepherd in winter and summer, help me to follow where you lead.

Bishop Joe Kennedy, Bishop of Burnley