

This Sunday is Good Shepherd Sunday which always falls on the fourth Sunday of Easter and celebrates Jesus as the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his flock and also highlights the call to vocations within the church.

I was really thrilled when I saw that the reading allocated for me included one of the 'I am' statements from John.

Unlike the other 3 gospels, John's gospel doesn't use parables and instead John reveals Jesus's divine nature through the use of 7 I AM statements. These echo back to God's revelation to Moses in the Old Testament. In Exodus chapter 3 Moses asks God what name shall I say when the Israelites ask who sent me? God replies I AM WHO I SAY I AM – this is what you say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you."

And the Hebrew word for God - Yahweh - is based on the verb "to be" and means "I am who I am/I am because I am/I will be who I will be" – it's a word that can't really be nailed down. But appropriately highlights God's self existence and self revelation.

By using the I AM statements John highlights that Jesus is clearly identifying himself as God on earth with these statements:

I am the bread of life  
I am the light of the world  
I am the gate (or door)  
I am the good shepherd  
I am the resurrection and the life  
I am the way, the truth and the life  
I am the true vine

The Old Testament warns against shepherds who were only concerned with their own self interest and neglected God's people. This is precisely the comparison Jesus is making with the Jewish Pharisees. The very people supposed to spiritually nourish and protect the people of God, were the very ones trying to lead them astray. They are the thieves and robbers, they are the false teachers.

At the end of the previous chapter the Pharisees have just refused to believe that Jesus and his healing comes from God when he restored sight to a blind man and instead expel the healed man from their community, more concerned with guarding their power and authority than the well being of their people.

Our passage today includes 'I am' the gate.

Jesus is saying that salvation can only come through him (the gate), there is only one way into the sheep fold and its through him. He's claiming exclusivity. Only through him can we have hope in eternal life.

The metaphor of the gate is not one of exclusion, it's not a licence to believe that as followers we are the true sheep and others are outsiders - otherwise we too become like the Pharisees. The purpose of the gate is not to keep out other sheep but instead to guard against threats to the sheep from bandits, thieves and wolves.

The sheepfold is often exposed to the elements – a fenced enclosure, a big sheep pen – and there is a gatekeeper or watchman guarding the entrance at night.

The function of the gate is to keep the sheep together in the sheepfold during the night and during the day the gate is opened so that the sheep can go out following their shepherd into the pasture. The gate and the shepherd work together for the well being of the sheep – this means that Jesus can be both the gate and the shepherd at the same time. He guards and protects his flock from danger and as the good shepherd he keeps, protects and guides his sheep.

Shepherding was a common job in the ancient world. Moses spent some time as a shepherd, Rachel was a shepherdess and David was a shepherd. Sheep are mentioned more than 200 times in the Bible, more than any other animal. They were important sources of wool, milk and meat and throughout the Bible God's people are compared to sheep. God is portrayed as the shepherd of his chosen flock by Isaiah and Ezekiel and of course in Psalm 23 – the Lord is my shepherd.... Like a shepherd with his sheep God knows each of us by name, he calls us to abundant life, leading us to safe pasture and sweet water.

Sheep recognise the voice of their shepherd, the one who cares for them. They don't follow strangers. There is trust between the sheep and the shepherd, he gently leads and they willingly follow. He doesn't have to take them against their will. The sheep and the shepherd know one another, they recognise one another.

The shepherd makes his distinctive calls and whistles his distinctive tune and his sheep know him apart from other shepherds, they know that he's the only one they follow and trust. To a shepherd each of his sheep are equally important, each one counts, he has their best interests at heart.

How in tune are we with the Good Shepherd's voice?

We need to know and recognise the voice of our good shepherd who truly cares for us above all the other sounds, noises and voices clamouring for our attention, claiming to offer us the things we need to be happy and content – a new car, clothes, food, holidays etc – no matter how much of this we have, unless we also have Jesus as our good shepherd we are listening to the wrong voice.

Can I suggest three ways of learning to listen and recognise Jesus' voice.

1. The first is obvious – we read the gospels and become as familiar as possible with all that Jesus said.

We can practice Lectio Divina – reading a passage slowly, reading it again and noticing what speaks to us. Or we can use Ignatian practices, reading and imagining ourselves there in the scene hearing the words spoken.

2. The second is to talk with others – this is how the first Christians learned and shared – they didn't have the written word.

This might be with a study group or a spiritual director or with a friend continually asking, what is Jesus saying to me?

3. And thirdly through prayer and silence. And this doesn't come easily to everyone but the determination to hear will be rewarded. God will find a way to speak when we long to hear.

The result of listening and following is a life to the very fullest, an abundant life. So let's pray.

May we all spend more time reading the Bible and in fellowship with others and in listening to atune ourselves to your guidance.

Amen

**Carol Elsasser, 26 April 2026**