

10am Parish Communion Sunday 26 April 2026

Acts 2:42-end, 1 Peter 2:19-end, John 10:1-10 – Who can we trust to lead us?

Today is Vocations Sunday, a day when we think about our calling.

Again and again in the Bible we see how people are called to roles and responsibilities that are not always obvious choices for them. Moses, Gideon, David, Mary, Paul ... the list goes on. They learn to trust in their calling as they learn to trust the one who calls them. Our gospel reading tells us more about the one who calls us.

First, *he* is the one who calls *us*, as a shepherd will call his own sheep. Now, a shepherd who goes to his sheepfold in the UK doesn't have to pick out his own sheep. All the sheep will belong to him. But in 1st c Palestine several families would keep their sheep together in one big sheepfold, with a gatekeeper, tasked to admit only each family's shepherd. Only the shepherds go in and out by the gate; and ***anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is [by definition] a thief and a bandit.***

The shepherd calls out to the sheep, and ***the sheep hear his voice.*** Jesus is the one who makes himself known to us, and we hear his voice.

Second, Jesus calls us by name. And being given a name is often the beginning of a relationship. If you've seen the film *Project Hail Mary* you'll know what I mean. To be given a name is to be recognised and appreciated as an individual. Jesus is ***the shepherd ... who calls his own sheep by name.***

Third, Jesus calls us *out* to follow him. This is another way in which shepherding in 1st c Palestine is different. In the Lake District or the Yorkshire Dales, the shepherd, with a sheepdog, is driving the sheep in front of them. But in 1st c Palestine, the shepherd goes in front, and the sheep follow the shepherd. As Jesus says, ***When the shepherd has brought out all his own [sheep], he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.***

Fourth, the people who follow Jesus are the ones who know his voice. Not as the voice of a living and breathing person, but nevertheless understanding what Jesus is saying to us, being ready to follow him, and trusting in him to lead us. That kind of trust rarely happens overnight and doesn't come easily. But it is easier for that kind of trust to grow - easier to hear the voice of Jesus – when we create the time and space to be attentive to what Jesus might be saying to us.

Fifth, knowing Jesus' voice and following him keeps us safe.

Knowing the voice of the shepherd means that the sheep ***will not follow a stranger.***

Knowing the voice of the shepherd keeps the sheep safe.

Where can we learn to listen to the voice of Jesus?

And how do we get ourselves ready to follow Jesus when he leads us out?

We're learning to listen to the voice of Jesus every time we gather as a church, here in this building. On Sundays, on Tuesdays in Evensong, and on Wednesdays with 10am communion, and at 6pm with Soul Space. Not just in this building, but elsewhere too, as we will hear Jesus in Reach when we go on our Quiet Day. And not only when we meet in person, but when we gather on zoom, for Morning Prayer or Compline. We're learning to listen to the voice of Jesus when we're reading and hearing the Word of God in our small groups, and asking questions about what it means for us today.

And even when we get together over coffee.

Like the first Christians Luke tells us about, in our reading from Acts, who ***devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*** Getting together with other Christians helps us to be more attentive to Jesus. Spending time with one another and with God, with glad and generous hearts.

Just as an aside, if when you heard about those 1st c Christians ***[selling] their possessions and goods and [distributing] the proceeds to all*** and you thought "that sounds more like communism than Christianity", it is worth us noticing that they clearly weren't selling everything, because they were still meeting in their houses to share meals together. But we can notice that they were offering what they had, ***as any had need.*** Here at St John's as we think about and develop what it means to be practicing Christian stewardship, that means being more explicit about what we need, financially, for the mission of the church.

If we think our gospel reading is just a nice parable about Jesus the shepherd and us as his sheep, we're missing the point. There's a good deal more going on, under the surface, in this conversation. My daughter-in-law likes to visit the places where they filmed her favourite film, the 2005 version of *Pride and Prejudice* with Keira Knightley and Matthew MacFadyen. A lot of it was filmed at houses owned by the National Trust, and we went to another of the film locations on Friday. One place we haven't yet visited is the location for the Mr Darcy's first proposal, the one that Lizzie Bennett so firmly rejects. That interaction is just one of many in the film where there is so much more going on under the surface.

Similarly with our gospel reading, in this conversation that seems to be all about methods of sheep-farming, there's so much more happening, but it is going on under the surface. Jesus is speaking to some of the Pharisees who have expressed their concern that Jesus ***is not from God,*** because Jesus has healed a man blind from birth, and Jesus has done this on the sabbath. The man who has been healed says that Jesus must be the Messiah – God's anointed one. But the Pharisees refuse to recognise Jesus as the Messiah.

Now as soon as Jesus began talking about the shepherd and his sheep, the Pharisees ought to have remembered the prophet Ezekiel's words about God sending a shepherd to rescue his sheep. This is not so much a conversation about shepherds and sheep as it is a conversation about whether Jesus is the Messiah. But the Pharisees ***did not understand what Jesus was saying to them***, so Jesus changes the metaphor slightly, and says ***I am the gate [and] whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture***. Only with Jesus can the sheep be safe and be free to flourish.

Anybody who's ever been to an airport to catch a flight knows how crucial it is to make sure that you go to the right gate. Get the gate wrong, and you can be walking miles in the wrong direction. Get distracted by trying to track down a bargain or looking for your favourite food outlet, and you find that you've missed your flight. Time is of the essence. We all need to be making our way to the right gate. To where we will find not just safety and security, but life in all its abundance.