This Sunday we come back to a very familiar theme, Jesus the Good Shepherd, but perhaps not the cosy image we are used to from stained glass windows in church and Countryfile. Shepherds in Jesus’ time were some of the lowest of the low – they were uneducated country bumkins, but worse than that, they were thought of as dirty, disreputable people, living right on the edge of law-abiding practice – outside the safety and order of the village.

So Jesus was making the educated and prosperous Pharisees he was talking to pretty uncomfortable by describing himself as the good shepherd. However, both Jesus and the Pharisees knew that God had used the image of the shepherd to speak powerfully in the Old Testament about the misuse of power by the very people who were supposed to be shepherding his people! So double squirm time for the Pharisees, they will have known he was getting at them! And they will all have remembered the places in the Old Testament where God describes himself as the shepherd of his people – maybe fine when they were nomads in the desert but a bit of a double take for more sophisticated city dwellers, a bit like saying today ‘The Lord is my dustbin man, he takes away all my rubbish’ or the ‘Lord is my cleaner, he reaches all the places dirt has settled in my life’. And maybe we should use these metaphors, because they are just as true as ‘The Lord is my shepherd’ and remind us that God walks in all jobs, however day to day and disregarded by others. so let’s be prepared to be surprised again by the way that this familiar metaphor speaks to us.

Metaphors invite us to use our imaginations to make connections, not just with Jesus’ words to his original listeners, but with what they might say to us today. We begin with the robber, who sneaks over the wall of the sheepfold – maybe even a high wall of a household built around the central courtyard where the sheep are penned for the night. The robber is clearly in the wrong, taking the flock of another. Sheep rustling is not a minor misdemeanour to be shrugged off – it is not only depriving someone else of their livelihood, but it is taking animals that the shepherd cares about. We can all be indignant about people who steal sheep. Jesus has got us right where he wants us – pointing the finger at someone else who is much nastier than we are, committing a crime we would never stoop to!

The true shepherd of the sheep enters by the gate, keeping a close eye on each sheep. Every day, the sheep will be checked – any that are missing will be searched for, any that are hurt will be tended. A shepherd is not put off by a whole load of woolly faces that all look the same – the true shepherd knows each one of those sheep individually. Remember Jesus’ story of the lost sheep? That shepherd went above and beyond in his care of his sheep, going out and looking for just one sheep out of a hundred. That’s the sort of shepherd Jesus is, nothing will stop him reaching each one of us.

The gatekeeper opens the gate for the legitimate shepherd, and just as he knows each sheep, so the sheep recognise his voice and come to him. He has names for each of them, he knows their individual traits and personalities. The sheep respond. They know that he is the source of their security and food. They come when he calls, they recognise his voice. Now you might think that of course they do, the shepherd has a bucket of food here. Well, so does Jesus – he offers us the water of life, bread of heaven. There’s some very good reasons for us to come when Jesus calls us!

After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. Shepherds on the hills of Galilee didn’t drive their sheep into a field and leave them there. They walked in front of their flocks and led them to green pastures and fresh water. Just so Jesus goes ahead of us, whether we are out there working on the front line, needing protection, or stuck at home doing nothing that seems very significant. Jesus doesn’t abandon the sheep that are no longer marketable, or edible! He doesn’t discriminate between useful sheep and useless ones – he sees us all as precious, and leads us onwards.

Here’s something important – the sheep know the difference between the voice of their shepherd and that of the stranger. They know to run away from someone unfamiliar. In fact, sheep that are still kept in flocks out on the hillside with their shepherd, get very stressed when they are sold, because they do not recognise the voice of their new shepherd and to start off with, they need careful attention. So are we listening out for the voice of Jesus, above all the hubbub of voices that surround us, even when we are in lockdown? Do we run away from the stranger? Do we avoid things and conversations that take us out of God’s love? Maybe we might ration our media exposure, and be sensible about what we read or watch? Maybe we should be careful to walk away from conversations in which we know we are getting annoyed or frustrated – while we are cooped up together, we have to work that bit harder to present our best to those we live with or support on the phone. We can do without the stranger within, the side of ourselves that is critical and negative.

Those who heard Jesus use this illustration didn’t understand what he meant. Do you sometimes feel like this, trying to make sense of Jesus’ words? How should we apply them? What is Jesus getting at? Jesus’ use of metaphors didn’t confuse his listeners, but he did leave them wondering – who are these thieves? Who are the bad guys here? We can do the comfortable bit, Jesus looking after us, but should we be trying out the idea that sometimes we are thieves and bandits? Do we ever mislead other people, exclude them from God’s love? Make them feel like they don’t belong? Almost all of Jesus’ stories have a bite to them!

So Jesus changed his metaphor. He’s the gate, not the shepherd this time. He’s the way into love, hope, joy, a relationship with the Father – but maybe we shouldn’t be thinking of the undemanding safety of the sheepfold? Living with Jesus as our shepherd doesn’t mean that we can stop thinking for ourselves. It doesn’t mean that life is going to be safe and easy! Jesus offers us the security of belonging to him – but he doesn’t leave us tucked up in heaven! No, he makes us into under-shepherds, sending us out to find the lost, to heal the sick, to spread his good news – to do what he does.

Jesus went on to say ‘All who came before me were thieves and robbers. But the true sheep did not listen to them’. Here’s an uncomfortable bit. We can sit here thinking, it’s just as well I’m a true sheep, because I’m now inside, safe from those thieves and robbers, while everyone else is outside. Actually, we would do better to be asking ourselves – do I really not listen to the thieves and robbers? What about the voices in my head that do rob me of peace, voices that are a bit louder now we are on our own so much with less going on? What about the voices in adverts and in social media, that say I need more, that I’m not trendy enough, not attractive enough, not significant enough? Those voices truly are thieves and robbers, and we need Jesus’ help to shut them out

And look - this gate that is Jesus is open! It will always be open, welcoming, inviting. It doesn’t shut behind the last good person, like the door to the ark did – it stands open for everyone, welcoming us into the good pastures, places to feed, to be restored, to be made whole. Even if we stray, we will be welcomed home again. The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. Jesus has come to give us a rich and satisfying life, in Eugene Petersen’s translation The Message ‘the real and eternal life, more and better life than we have ever dreamed of.

What does that life look like? Each of us will see it differently, but we can all get a glimpse of it all around us as spring ripens – birds building nests and feeding young in our gardens, flowers opening, fruit forming. The world is full of abundant growth at the moment, and it lifts our hearts! And there are other signs of God’s life even in this trying time: in the quiet now there are so few cars and no aeroplanes, we are very aware of children playing around us. If you go for a walk, people want to say hello – people are valuing each other. Families are out on foot and on bicycles, just enjoying each other’s company. When we clap for the NHS on Thursday nights, we have the chance to meet neighbours we have never really spoken to before. There is a willingness to help, to support each other that is new and encouraging. That’s not of course to minimise the very real suffering of people who are lonely or afraid, but we should all the same enjoy and contribute to the kingdom of God made visible in new ways.

And strangely, as we are forced to live with a much greater awareness of our mortality, so we are pushed back into God’s arms. We have to learn to trust. We are living on heaven’s door step, much closer than usual to our own deaths, and the deaths of those we love. That abundant life that Jesus speaks of is eternal, for now and for the time to come. The green pastures spread out beyond the horizon, and the gate stands open to welcome us, now and when our times comes.