

Carmelite Monastery --Lectio on John 10: 1-10

By Robert F. Leavitt, PSS -- St. Mary's Seminary & University

May 2, 2020

For this lectio on John 10, I am using *The New American Bible* (Revised Edition translation). A lectio aims at a close reading of a biblical passage. The goal is to tease out subtle meanings contained in the text. A lectio is not a homily. Its purpose is to enable us to listen better to a Scripture passage.

In the first 10 verses of the Gospel of John Chapter 10, we find ourselves listening to a discourse by Jesus. The beginning of the discourse concerns typical shepherding issues: thieves trying to steal sheep, a sheep gate and gate keeper protecting the sheepfold where the sheep are, the shepherd whose voice the sheep recognize and follow, etc. That's all.

What we don't hear in these first 10 verses is Jesus declaring, "I am the good shepherd." Those words come in the second part of the chapter which I am not commenting on. My remarks are limited to the meanings in the first 10 verses of Chapter 10 of John.

What Kind of Text is This?

The 10th chapter of the Gospel of John is a Johannine version of a parable of Jesus. This parable, however, does not sound like the Prodigal Son or Good Samaritan parables. Those parables are extended narratives, a story about a son and a victim. John 10: 1-10 does not tell that kind of story. It merely gives us a snapshot of shepherding issues in general. It is an inventory of typical issues in shepherding sheep – protecting the sheepfolds where they stay from robbers, the sheep gate controlling access to the sheepfold, the shepherds calling their sheep and leading them in and out of the sheepfold. The typical issues feel like symbols we are invited to decipher.

Though we are reading John 10 in the Easter season, the discourse itself is not part of an Easter appearance of Jesus. Rather, he delivers it during his ministry immediately following the Healing of the Man Born Blind and immediately before the Raising of Lazarus. Over the past two weeks, the Gospel readings have been resurrection appearances: the appearance of Jesus to Doubting Thomas in John 20 and his appearance to the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus in Luke 24. The Parable of the Shepherd in John 10 is different. Yet, there are profound Cross and Resurrection implications in it. We'll get to that.

As I said, the first part of John 10 concerns what I am calling typical shepherding issues and what they mean. The second part of John 10 – which we are not concerned with today – is the parable known as the Good Shepherd. That parable speaks about the shepherd laying down his life for the sheep. Our parable today is about the shepherd leading the sheep and their recognizing his voice and the sheep gate protecting the sheep from thieves and robbers.

To get the gist of that, it's important to separate the two parables from each other.

One other matter. In religious art, Jesus is often portrayed as the good shepherd. When he is, he is portrayed carrying a sheep. This portrayal actually mixes two different gospel passages together: it takes the good shepherd name from John 10 and adds the shepherd in Luke 15 who searches for the one lost sheep leaving the 99 others in the desert and who rejoices when he gets home that he found it. It's a lost and found parable. In John 10 the shepherd does not go looking for a sheep or put it on his shoulders. What is emphasized here is leading and calling the sheep, not carrying them. The sheep gate is what protects the sheep.

Nevertheless, the good shepherd carrying a sheep is one of the earliest figures in Christian art. We find it on catacomb walls over 150 times. With the exception of the Crucifixion and the Annunciation, the Good Shepherd is one of the more popular images in Christian art. I myself have a folk art crucifix from El Salvador a friend gave me. It depicts Christ as a good shepherd holding lamb while he is on the cross. Ironically, this crucified good shepherd takes us right to the paschal heart of the matter in John 10.

For this lectio, please bracket in your mind's eye the rich iconography of the good shepherd carrying a sheep. What needs attention are the typical issues which serve as symbols: the symbols of a sheepfold, a sheep gate, a shepherd and a shepherd's voice which the sheep recognize. These are the images which need to play on the keyboard of our faith today.

So, let's recall the progression of images in the first part of John 10.

Chapter 10 begins (1) "Amen, Amen, I say to you" whoever does not enter the sheepfold through the gate is a thief and robber; (2) it says whoever enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep; (3) it tell us the gatekeeper opens the gate for the shepherd; (4) it says the shepherd calls each sheep by name; (5) the shepherd leads the sheep out of the sheepfold and walks in front of them; (6) the sheep follow because they recognize the shepherd's voice; (7) the sheep run away from a stranger because they don't recognize his voice. That's the nucleus of this symbolic parable.

That's all we have here. No interpretation of the images as symbols is offered. Suddenly the narrator of the discourse pauses to tell us in verse 6 that Jesus' listeners did not get what he was driving at in these first 5 verses. So, starting with verse 7, Jesus explains what he meant.

"Amen, Amen I say to you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers." He says it again, "I am the gate." Then, Jesus, speaking in his role here as the sheep gate says, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly."

This is where the lectio ends.

John's Gospel is divided by experts into two parts: the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory. John 10 is late in the Book of Signs and contains hints of the Book of Glory. The Book of Glory begins in with the Last Supper in John 13. From there to the end, Jesus reveals who he is in truth

even more explicitly. In John 13-17, Jesus teaches his disciples how they are to live and the symbolic essentials of his mission and of his relationship with the Father. Already in John 10, and most certainly in John 13-17, the church without knowing it is listening to the risen Christ speak. With this reading, we are moving from the dramatic Easter stories to something else. The curtain of the mystery of Jesus' identity is being torn away from history to reveal the essential.

The parable of Jesus the Sheep Gate in the first part of John 10 prepares for Jesus' later self-identification as the Way, the Truth and the Life. The gate is the way in and the way out, we might say. The parable of the Good Shepherd prepares us for Jesus' coming crucifixion where he in fact lays down his life. The Story of the Raising of Lazarus in John 11 – where Jesus gives life back to Lazarus – fulfills the promise in John 10 about giving life in abundance -- the final verse in today's lectio.

One final comment. Chapters 10-17 in the Gospel of John have had a profound impact on the Christian theology of death and resurrection, of what eternal life means, of the church as a community of love and service, of the nature of Jesus as Son of God and of the Trinity. John 13-17 is where Jesus in all the gospels addresses his Father directly. John the Evangelist allows us to eavesdrop, as it were, on Jesus speaking to his Father.

With these remarks as context, let's look at some of the main images in the first ten verses of John 10 and what they mean.

1. On Shepherds and Sheep in General

Shepherds and sheep are stock biblical images. Intertextual allusions abound on those images throughout the Bible. The Book of Numbers 27: 16-17 says, "Appoint a man over the congregation . . . who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd." Jesus quotes that very passage in Mark 6. He tells the parable of the Lost Sheep in Luke 15: 3-7 which I mentioned earlier. We can assume the shepherd-and-sheep paradigm is earlier than Jesus and was taken up by him from the prophets.

The word "sheep" evokes many connotations: essential animals in a herding culture, rather cute yet clueless, not smart, easily frightened, prone to bolting in one direction or another where the rest follow like lemmings, inclined to get lost or be stolen or be eaten. Sheep absolutely require a shepherd to protect them from themselves as well as from their predators. Sheep are not distinguished in the gospels as either rams or ewes – as male or female. No gender differentiations apply.

The word "shepherd" evokes corresponding counter-images to sheep: attention and care, foresight, local knowledge of good grazing and round-the-clock protection. As a metaphor, shepherd implies love, provision and leadership at once. How did this stock image become so important in Israel? The period of the monarchy in Israel, from 1000 BCE to the 6th century BCE, left a lasting imprint on Israel's greatest prophets. King David was a shepherd. But corrupt Israelite kings after him and bad priests tarnished the shepherd image. Ezekiel dedicates an entire

chapter of his book to castigating the royal and priestly leaders of Israel as being “false shepherds.” Jesus undoubtedly knew that passage.

The shepherding metaphors of John 10 stand in marked contrast to selfish and irresponsible leaders. Ezekiel 34 has God say, “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who have been pasturing themselves,” ... and further, “I myself will search for my sheep and examine them,”... and, “I will bring them back to their own country and pasture them upon the mountains of Israel.”

In John, the false shepherds, thieves, bandits are not the kings or priests of the prophet Ezekiel, but the Pharisees who imagine themselves as spiritual guides. Jesus castigates them as blind guides in John 9: 40-41.

So, the shepherd motif is common in the great prophets. No surprise that Jesus would use it and that John would exploit its significance. The shepherd image occurs 7 times in Isaiah; 12 times in Jeremiah (famously in Jer. 23: 1-4); 11 times in the 34th chapter of Ezekiel alone. Zechariah 13 says, “I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.” Both Matthew and Mark quote it. The Letter to the Hebrews 13 address Christ as “Our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd.”

2. On Sheepfolds

In biblical times, sheepfolds were corrals surrounded by stone walls. They might be arranged as large rectangular paddocks, located on a hillside close to grazing grounds. Many sheep would be kept there. The stone walls could have briars laid on top for added security. Sheepfolds could also be smaller for one or two flocks of sheep.

3. On Sheep Gates

Jesus calls himself the sheep gate. Sheepfolds had openings at one end which served as sheep gates. The sheep gate was not the gate we think of – something on hinges to allow opening and closing and secured with a bolt and lock. The sheep gate in John’s mind was merely an opening in the stone wall of the sheepfold. In his absence the shepherd would place an obstacle across the opening in the sheepfold wall to secure it. Shepherds have even been known to rest and lie prone across the opening making themselves the sheep gate, physically preventing sheep from wandering out or thieves and predators from coming in.

In the parable, Jesus identifies himself as the sheep gate and the gate keeper. After what I just said about sheepfolds and sheep gates, the impression is of Jesus stretched physically across the opening to the sheepfold. If that is what the gate image by itself mirrors, we have food for thought.

The shepherd as a gate, as a round-the-clock turnstile to the sheepfold, is worth thinking about. The gate and gate keeper controls access to the sheepfold. These distinguish real shepherds from false ones. These protect the sheep confined to one arena where they would be easy prey.

The Gospel of John does not use terms such as “church or assembly,” or “body of Christ,” or “people of God.” The community is portrayed as disciples, as a sheepfold under a shepherd’s care, as a community protected from false shepherds. Moreover, John gives no list of the Twelve. For John, church order or hierarchy— whatever that might have been like for the Johannine Community – is subordinated to personal confidence in Jesus as the gate and his voice as the voice they follow. Communal love marks this Johannine community as a utopian ideal. The struggles Paul had with his communities and which the Pastoral Letters talk about, with passages on apostles, overseers, presbyters, deacons, prophets and others, is another world from that of John.

If the sheepfold is the Johannine community itself, this text would remind leaders and followers that Jesus himself is the sheep gate. As gatekeeper Jesus is the gauntlet that ecclesial leadership and followership must go through. A community leader who jumps Jesus the gate is a thief and robber.

Some scholars believe the Johannine community was influenced by a Gnostic thought making it anti-institutional and anti-sacramental like a cult. Maybe, maybe not. What is not in doubt is that for John Jesus the gate said something about what we call church – who gets in and who is kept out. Anyone aspiring to leadership in the church needs to measure herself or himself against Jesus the gate and the shepherd.

4. On the Shepherd’s Voice

The shepherd’s voice is symbolic as well. The word “voice” is repeated 3 times in the first 5 verses of our passage. The sheep listen to their shepherd because they recognize his voice. This is a symbol backed up by the practice of shepherds.

Large sheepfolds served as staging arenas, like corrals, holding many different sheep for different shepherds. The shepherds would call, and their own sheep would respond and follow them out. Shepherds with smaller flocks have been known to call sheep by nicknames. So, the symbol of a shepherd knowing his sheep by name and the sheep knowing the voice of the shepherd is anchored in herding experience.

The voice is even more symbolic. In the Bible, God reveals as only a Voice speaking to Moses and to the prophets. They say, “The Word of the Lord came to me and said...” No one in the Bible sees God speak. God never appears as anything but a Voice. God is a Voice speaking to Moses on Mt. Sinai. God is a Voice speaking to Isaiah in the temple. God is a Voice speaking from heaven at Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan and at his transfiguration.

In the first verse of the Book of Genesis, God is a Voice speaking, “Let there be...and so it was.” The prologue to John’s Gospel declares, “In the beginning was the Word.” The English term “Word” translates the NT Greek, *Logos*. Some four centuries ago, the humanist scholar Erasmus translated *Logos* into Latin as *Sermo*. “In the beginning was the *Sermo*.” *Sermo* means a spoken discourse. The word *sermon* comes from that – a spoken-word, a word carried by the inflections

of a voice. Not a word as an idea or an unspoken abstraction. Much hangs on the difference between a mere word and the spoken word which reveals who God is.

The voice of the shepherd is mentioned 3 times in the first 5 verses of John 10. Shepherds call sheep. But the image of the voice says more. The emphasis is not on a message alone or some propositional content. Sheep would not get that. And Jesus, after all, wrote nothing. It was Jesus' voice that made his words memorable and transforming for his disciples.

Voice puts flesh on words of a message. It is a word in-fleshed, if you wish. What a fingerprint is to the body's physical identity, the voice is to a spiritual identity. A text is like a musical score calling for an instrument and a human voice to bring it to life. The voice of the shepherd in John 10, when seen in human terms, is more than a message. There are deep pastoral, liturgical and theological meanings in it. We may say about something, "I get the lyrics, but the melody is wrong." Do older listeners to this lectio remember the ad for RCA Victor Victrola with the cute fox terrier's head cocked to the Victrola's large horn? Do you remember the ad under the picture -- "His Master's Voice?" There you have it.

Conclusion

These ten verses have important ecclesial and communal implications which I'll leave to you to sort out.

Ecclesial leadership in any church order goes seriously astray without keeping the Johannine shepherd image central. The *pallium* that is worn by archbishops and the pope is only a vestment if isn't a symbol of John 10 and John 21. Wearing a *pallium* of lamb's wool over a chasuble by itself is no guarantee of anything. Without the shepherd, the sheep gate, the voice of the shepherd in John 10, spiritual leadership turns executive and bureaucratic.

A final paschal allusion. A lectio on John 10: 1-10 has much to ponder in images of Jesus as the gate and as the shepherd's voice.

The lectio ends with Jesus saying: "I came that they may have life and have it to the full." Immediately afterwards, Jesus says outright, "I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

In John 21: 15-19, we have a final resurrection appearance of Jesus. It occurs in a surrealistic way as an apparition on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. There, Jesus asks Peter three times over -- Do you love me? Three times over, Peter responds, "You know I love you." After each response, Jesus gives Peter a different version of the same command: "feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep."

The Good Shepherd from John 10, in effect, returns in John 21. Having already laid his life down for the sheep, Jesus the shepherd hands their further care to Peter. With a word from the Good Shepherd in glory, Peter is transformed from fisherman to shepherd.

In John, the crucifixion itself is the moment of Jesus' entrance into glory. He dies for love of the sheep. John 10 has Jesus say this: "No one takes my life from me. I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own."

These words at the end of John 10 incline reflection towards the most profound theology of salvation imaginable. They go far beyond the retribution theory of salvation built on the premise of a restoration of justice, a sacrificial theory where a blood payment is required to rebalance a lost equilibrium.

In the deepest sense, no one takes Jesus' life from him if we believe these words from the Gospel of John. Pontius Pilate and the Romans don't take it from him -- though they are the executioners. The Jews and Jewish leaders don't take it from him -- whatever role they played. Even a Just God doesn't take Jesus' life from him. After all, Jesus says he and the Father are one. Jesus dies for love of the sheep and for their abundant life. That is truly godlike.

The First Letter of John 4 puts it in the simplest terms when it says, "God is love."