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## **One Hundred Percent Lambing (John 10: 1-18)**

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My grandfather was a farmer in Western Australia – he grew wheat and farmed sheep. In the year I was born, my mother’s two sisters also gave birth to a child each – my cousins, Mary and David. Grandpa, tickled pink with his three daughters and their growing families, ever afterwards celebrated the year of what he called ‘one hundred percent lambing’! Oh, how the lives we lead suggest the metaphors we live by!

Well, in a similar way, ovine metaphors – images of lambs, sheep and shepherding – abound in the religious imagination of the Hebrew people. In the gospel of John, they’re central. When Jesus very first appears on the stage in this gospel, John the Baptist declares: ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’ (John 1: 29). At the end of the gospel, almost Jesus’ last words are his instructions to Peter to ‘Feed my sheep’ (21: 15-19). It’s John who makes the most of the metaphor of Jesus as the Passover lamb, by placing his crucifixion on the Day of Preparation while the lambs for the festival were being slaughtered (18: 28). And it’s John who, unique among the evangelists, develops the motif of the Good Shepherd where Jesus describes himself also as the sheep-gate and sheep-fold.

So what’s with all the sheep? Maybe it’s that, by way of this cluster of images, John’s gospel seeks to express the strange subversiveness and the mind-blowing comprehensiveness, of Jesus’ meaning – how he is both victim *and* shepherding king of Israel, how he is both a gateway to abundant life *and* a place to abide. Yet in tonight’s reading, these images jostle one another – seeming to pull in different directions, making Jesus’ words difficult to interpret.

The commentators agree that the background to the Good Shepherd discourse is a passage in the prophet Ezekiel where the kings of Israel are criticized for being false

shepherds: 'The word of the Lord came to me: "Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them – ... Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak ... healed the sick ... bound up the injured' (Ezek. 34: 1-4) and so on. The result is that the sheep are scattered with no one to search or seek for them (34: 6). And so – according to Ezekiel, the Lord continues – I will rescue the sheep from these marauding shepherds, and 'I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out ... I will feed them with good pasture ...; there they shall lie down in good grazing land' (34: 11-14).

If this is in background, then when Jesus says, 'I am the good shepherd' (John 10: 11), it's of a piece with the other 'I am' sayings in John's gospel, where Jesus explicitly identifies himself *as* God, as God's just and gracious presence to God's people. It's a large claim, startling to his audience. But it's reasonably straightforward as a matter of theological interpretation.

The preceding part of the passage is trickier. Remember that Jesus has begun by distinguishing between those who come into the sheepfold legitimately – by the gate – and those who come in like thieves and bandits. 'The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep' (John 10: 2). And he goes on to say that the sheep will recognize the voice of the shepherd and so follow him when he leads them out. Why might this be important? Well, what are the sheep doing on the other side of this gate?

Could it be that they are waiting to be sacrificed? Scholar Gil Bailie has suggested that as well as Ezekiel there is another Scriptural passage in the background here. It's John chapter 5, and the account of Jesus healing a paralytic by the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Now the Sheep Gate was the opening in the city wall, through which the

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<sup>1</sup> Gil Bailie, 'The Gospel of John' (audio), [accessed <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-a/easter4a/, 4 May 2017>]

sheep came on their way to their sacrificial deaths in the Temple. And only their shepherd, the one who enters by the same gate and who knows them, is capable of leading them out of this death trap. Only he can save them from their fate at the hands of the sacrificial system. Here again what Jesus says: the shepherd 'calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger because they do not know the voice of strangers'.

In support of this reading, we might notice that this passage follows immediately after the story of Jesus healing the blind man in John 9. Here we have an account of someone being 'sacrificed' by a religious system according to which he could only ever been deemed an outsider, a sinner, on account of his affliction. It's Jesus, whom the blind man more and more comes to recognize, who sets him free, who leads him out.

Well – Jesus' meaning seemed somewhat obscure even back then. Jesus used this figure of speech with them, John writes, 'but they did not understand what he was saying to them'. So Jesus appears to switch metaphors. Ok – think of it like this instead – I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits – that is, they didn't have the good of the sheep in mind and the sheep didn't listen to them. But 'I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture' (10: 7-9). That is – unlike the Sheep Gate, which allows only for one-way traffic through the city wall leading to sacrifice in the temple – the gate that Jesus is constitutes an open fold. The sheep can come in for protection, and go out again to find pasture.

But how is this possible? How is the one-way traffic of the sacrificial system overturned, such that the sheep now have freedom to be, no longer incipient victims for the sacrificial machine? It's because the good shepherd has laid down his life for the sheep. Baillie writes: 'In other words, the difference between the sheep, i.e., the victim, and the shepherd disappear. Here is a shepherd who is himself a victim, and he will lead

the sheep out of the sheepfold'.<sup>2</sup> How? Not because he substitutes himself as victim to a God who demands sacrifice. Rather, by his self-giving to death and his being raised to life, he undoes the whole sacrificial mechanism, he opens the gate.

Before this, sacrifice was thought to be something God wanted – sacrifice, not only of sheep, but of all those who were deemed impure, foreign, afflicted, 'sinful'. Socially, religiously, they too were to be cut off, killed off, excluded from the body. But when Jesus, executed for good religious reasons on a charge of blasphemy, returns to those who betrayed and denied him bearing peace, bringing restoration, he reveals there is nothing vengeful in God, nothing that demands the creation of victims. The whole sacrificial system is shown to be non-necessary. Grace is truly grace.

And this is how he makes it possible for the sheep, for us, to be released from having our lives determined by the dynamic of sacrificial violence, taking up our positions as either victims or perpetrators. And this is why he, the good shepherd, is the gatherer of sheep from other sheepfolds into one flock. The sacrificial mechanism depends on the creation of inside and outside, of us and them. But, as James Alison says: 'There is no definitive inside and outside for the Good Shepherd, there are places of shelter and of feeding, different places to which the [gate] gives access, and which presuppose movement, non-fixity, and confidence in being neither in nor out'.<sup>3</sup>

It's always rather puzzled me that the Good Shepherd discourse comes at this point, the fourth Sunday in the Easter season. We have three weeks of resurrection stories and then it's as if we're suddenly back in the middle of Jesus' teaching ministry. But read in this way, I begin to get why the lectionary brings us here. Jesus, the Lamb of God, has been killed – put to death just as you'd expect in any sacrificial system. But he has been raised from death. And his risen life has become for us a gateway out of our own entrapment in systems that depend on victims for their continuance. As we hear his voice and follow him out, no longer run by the fear of what people think, or what

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<sup>2</sup> Baillie, 'Gospel of John' (audio).

<sup>3</sup> James Alison, 'The Good Shepherd' [accessed <http://girardianlectionary.net/res/goodshepherd.htm>, 4 May 2017]

may be done to us, so we discover that we too are becoming less like frightened sheep and more like shepherds ourselves, called to share in 'Feeding the lambs' and 'Tending our fellow sheep'. Jesus said: 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'. One hundred percent lambing – no less!