



Opening Responses for Eastertide

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Do you find the image of Jesus as being the Good Shepherd helpful, or not? Why do you feel like that about it?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Glory to you, O God:
your raised Jesus from the grave,
bringing us victory over death and giving us eternal life.

Glory to you, O Christ:
for us and for our salvation you overcame death,
and opened the gate to everlasting life.

Glory to you, O Holy Spirit:
you lead us into the truth, show us the way,
and breathe new life into us.

**Glory to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
now and forever. Amen**

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 23 (StF 805)

The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff — they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead,
opening the way to everlasting life,
both in the here-and-now, and throughout all that is to come.
Let us therefore bring to God those things in need of renewal:
We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the times we've failed to love one another:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the injustices and oppression in our world:

Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the failings and disunity of your Church:

Restore us and heal us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of new beginnings,
of love stronger than even death,
you set us free from the past,
to flourish in the future.

Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and breathe new life into us.

Amen

Reading John 10:1 – 10

Sermon

It can be fascinating to look into the origins of words, and to examine how their use has changed over time. What was commonplace in a particular period of history can become somewhat obscure for many as society changes and people's everyday experiences shift. Britain was transformed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, impacting on my ancestors as they moved from rural parts of Lancashire to towns and cities for work in the mechanised hells which were mills in the cotton industry. Leaving the countryside behind meant adapting to a new way of life, governed not by the changing seasons but by the relentless rhythm

of the machines that drove mass production and transformed Britain into the 'workshop of the world'. Although we now live within a post-industrial nation, with all the tension that this transition has exposed, urbanisation continues unabated across the globe, so that city living has become the norm for a sizeable chunk of the world's population. It isn't surprising, therefore, that the language many of us draw upon to describe our experience and to which we naturally relate has also shifted greatly.

Jesus of Nazareth was such a great communicator because among other things, he was extremely adept at taking everyday ideas, with which his audiences would have been intimately familiar, and using them to open up the extraordinary life of the Kingdom of God. Sheep and shepherding were commonplace, and so when Jesus talked of himself as the 'Good Shepherd' in John 10:11, almost everyone had some idea of what this meant and looked like. For most people who, like me, have always lived in urban areas, our knowledge is second-hand, at best. Perhaps as a consequence of this, and also because we do not routinely refer to ourselves as the sheep of God's pasture in twenty-first century Britain, like the people of Israel did within first-century Palestine, we can easily miss the full meaning of what these verses implied for those who first heard them. In particular, when in 10:1 – 30 we discover Jesus describing himself not just as the Good Shepherd but also as the gate to the sheepfold of God, this was not a cosy collection of claims, but a scandalous set of statements.

Moreover, and as if this was not enough to be going on with, there's a mixing up of metaphors in our reading that is not easily unpacked. As with so much of the fourth and final Gospel, this section of Jesus' teaching offers a rich tapestry of imagery to ponder. I like to imagine it as being rather like looking through the kaleidoscope and rejoicing in the complexity of patterns and colours which together form a thing of beauty. Now, if our purpose in exploring the Scriptures is to come away with the 'one true interpretation', we will find all this a struggle.

Yet, if we take this passage literally, how can Jesus be the gate and the gatekeeper and the shepherd at the same time? Being dropped into a reading and pondering our way out, or walking inside its room and searching for the light switch, brings us to a very different space than we will find if we strap it to a chair, and torture the meaning out of it! This 'figure of speech', as John calls it, is full of treasure waiting to be unearthed, if we're able to live with some deliberate ambiguity. In a world that continues to change rapidly and might overwhelm us at times, this section of John's Gospel does indeed have wisdom to offer, even if we need to do a bit of work to fully appreciate it.

Step back into chapter nine, and the first thing we learn is that, once again in this Gospel, the context in which a wellspring of metaphors bubbles up is one of conflict. Jesus had been confronted by several Pharisees enraged about his healing of a blind man on the Sabbath. After this man proclaimed his belief that Jesus was the 'Son of Man', he declared that he had come "so those who don't yet see may see, and those who do see might become blind" (John 9:39). Was Jesus accusing those Pharisees of being blind? He went onto describe the sheepfold of God, and there is a lot of really powerful stuff going on.

First off, notice how Jesus was making a bold statement, laying bare who he was and how he understood his vocation as the Son of God. We would be mistaken if we were to think that Jesus' hearers would have simply thought 'that's nice' when he declared himself the Good Shepherd, because that language was reserved for God alone, and the people of Israel knew they were the sheep of God's pasture, as Psalm 79:13 puts it. Furthermore, the prophet Ezekiel had told them God was really angry with those shepherds who took advantage of, and abandoned, their sheep. God declared, "I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and will make them lie down, says the Lord God" (Ezekiel 34:11 – 15). This imagery would have sprung to mind among people who knew their scriptures well, and prompted a question that would

have excited some and scandalised others: was Jesus claiming not only to be Israel's Messiah, but to in fact be God?

Next, notice how Jesus talks about thieves and bandits busting into the sheepfold, rather than using the gate. The contrast here may be with those Pharisees condemning him, or with Judas Iscariot as the thief (John 12:6) who would betray him, or the many false messiahs, who came before and after him offering hope and promising triumph through rebellion, yet one by one falling by the wayside. Jesus alone can lead the sheep to safe pastures. He knows everybody by name, in a way in which those of us in leadership roles within organisations of any significant size can only dream of! Finally, we're told that this is ultimately about his coming to bring life in all its fullness, life which pours down, like the unquenchable waters of a monsoon, drenching all who dare to let down their umbrellas of worldly security, and strip off the waterproofs of false promises and stifling religiosity.

Now, if Jesus is actually the only One who can really guarantee our ultimate security, then fullness of life means sitting lightly to the idols which easily become substitutes. This is as true for the churches as it is beyond them; it is not wrong to love our buildings and traditions, but if they become more important than God, it means that we have missed the point. Instead, fullness and abundance of life flows from being fully known, called by name and loved enough to die for. At a time when people are questioning what life is about, and aching for genuine hope, may our words and actions point towards Jesus, who is the gate and the gatekeeper and the Good Shepherd, by radiating love, that same love he embodied. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

You're invited to use Psalm 23 as the basis for your own prayers for others, especially those who feel God absent at this time.

Lord's Prayer

Final Prayer – Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

Good Shepherd of the sheep,
by whom the lost are sought and guided into the fold:
feed us and we shall be satisfied;
heal us and we shall be made whole;
and lead us, that we may be with you;
for you are alive and reign,
with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and forever. **Amen**

Blessing

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

May the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
fill us with resurrection hope,
and remain upon us and all whom we love and pray for,
now and throughout eternity. **Amen**