

**Year A**  
**Fourth Sunday After Easter / APCM**  
**Acts 2:42-end**  
**I Peter 2:19-end**  
**John 10:1-10**

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A report to the Annual Parochial Church Meeting, Jerusalem, for 33AD. The last year has been, to say the least, quite eventful. The plans we were making at the start of the year for the gradual takeover of society didn't quite materialise. However, we all enjoyed a lovely donkey ride into Jerusalem with much singing and joyful shouting, our thanks to the choir for leading us, for the donkey owners, and the linen guild for cleaning our cloaks from the results of over excited donkeys. The treasurer's report isn't great reading to begin with, it seems some money has been embezzled, but the culprit has, let's say left the organisation. Many of you will recall the very chaotic week that involved a lot of fresh expressions, I know there have been some murmurings about not sticking to the traditional language of Passover and the new-fangled washing of feet, but we can evaluate all that later. It does seem that the new service of breaking of the bread has become increasingly popular and so the leadership team are thinking of making it a permanent feature. Our apologies for the lack of services for over a month while the leadership all hid in an upper room, but I'm sure it gave us all time to reflect! It also gave us the perfect opportunity to take over from the women who went to the tomb that first morning. We'll try to balance out the emotion that many of them put into that, women eh? Since then, there has been remarkable growth, we went from 120 to 3,000 overnight, though that hasn't been without its complications. Our thanks go to

our new deacons, well the ones who are still alive anyway, for smoothing the waters with the warring widows. In summary our main activities this year have been devoting ourselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. We await to see what comes of it.

Well maybe ... It is closer to the truth than we might think. The reading from Acts is in fact a summary, Luke is summarising Peter's first sermon on the Day of Pentecost to follow into the second sermon to come. Confession time, I'm not a big fan of the Acts of the Apostles. Growing up as a Pentecostal, Acts was pretty much our textbook, this is how church should be, there should be miracles and signs and wonders and daily conversions of thousands of people. And because that often isn't the lived reality you feel a failure as a Christian and as a leader. And if I'm being totally honest it still feels like a rebuke every time we hear this reading. Except that Luke is deliberately presenting an idealized, "utopian vision of what the Church might be in its finest realization... the Spirit [brings] about a community which realized the highest aspirations of human longing: unity, peace, joy, and the praise of God."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p.62

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So, in some senses, Luke is presenting us here with a vision of what life in all its fulness means in community. The spontaneous response of the community is a desire and a devotion to learning about Jesus, to being together as a new people, to praying unceasingly and out of this flows their spontaneous response of generosity and giving. This is what the Church is capable of!

But we are only capable of that when we follow the voice of the one who calls us. Today is sometimes known as Good Shepherd Sunday, which is odd because our reading from John doesn't talk about Jesus as the Shepherd, but the gate. We anticipate Jesus's I Am saying, I Am the Good Shepherd, but here he says I Am the Gate, and if we miss that we miss something vital about the life of the Church that no report, or spreadsheet, or power point presentation (and we'll have all three later!) can tell us: we only exist, function and flourish if we enter this new resurrection life through Jesus Christ. It is in and through Jesus as the gate that we come to pasture.

There are hints of the shepherd imagery to come, hearing his voice and following, the rich seam of shepherd imagery in the OT for kings, leaders, prophets, particularly in Ezekiel 34. But it is the gate that Jesus is focused on here.

“It is the open gate that allows the shepherd to come in and it is the open gate that leads to life-giving pastures.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus is not the gate keeper, he is the gate. The open gate that leads us out. “The climax of the story is not security but abundant life.”<sup>3</sup>

And that is important as we, as a community, review where we have been and where we think God is calling us. We will have read reports and we will talk about money and all of that might make us feel secure, we have survived another year, we will survive another year, we can go home secure. If we do that, we miss the shepherd’s voice and we ignore the open gate and the pastures ahead of us. Rather we should be thinking, “has what we have done opened the gate to us and to others, for us and them to find this abundant life?” “Have our activities, our giving, our spending, our priorities led us and others to new pastures to feed us, grow us and change us?” “Will the plans we have for the next few years shake us out of our security and lead us to the new pastures, lead new people to those pastures?”

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections Year A*, p.65

<sup>3</sup> *op cit*

Because beyond the legalities and the formalities of the meetings today is the reality that we are called to function beyond that. In the epistle in Peter's name, we are reminded that we are to function in a world that is suffering. The writer leans heavily on the image of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, one we saw and heard a lot of in Holy Week, to serve as both an example of how to suffer and how redemptive life can bring about good, Christ suffered for us. That is why the readers are urged to return to the shepherd and guardian of their souls, to Jesus, for there is no suffering that is beyond him.

“So to return to the shepherd and guardian of your souls is to step through the gateway of Christ's cross into an entirely new world, where we are no longer sheep, easily satisfied with small securities, but children of God, free to come and go in God's world. With that freedom comes responsibility, and a willingness to abandon our day-to-day security, as Jesus did, in order to gain the total security of being and doing what we are made for.”<sup>4</sup> Luke shows us in Acts what the Church is made for, what the Church can be if we step through the gate.

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<sup>4</sup> Jane Williams, p.65

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It is important in this Easter season that we hear and respond to that as we grow into the resurrection life on offer to us. Learning together, praying alone and together, fellowshiping together and all centred around the Eucharist is how we learn to be the Church and how we live out life in all its fulness for ourselves and our communities. We will be talking about each of those later this morning. There is a part for each one of us to play as we each hear the voice calling us into fresh pastures and abundant life.

The gate is open, abundant life is laid out in front of you, one step is all it takes.