

Our coming in and going out

Each year, on the 4th Sunday of Easter we listen to Jesus speaking in chapter 10 of John's Gospel; this year, Year A in the lectionary, we hear the first extract. Somewhat awkwardly, Jesus mixes his metaphors: from what he says about the sheep hearing his voice and following him, we expect him to say, as he will go on to say, that he is *the Good Shepherd*. But instead, he declares himself to be *the gate for the sheep*: the one through whom the sheep come in and go out. So let me reflect this morning on *our going out and our coming in*, as Psalm 121 renders it; and with reference to our other readings, from Acts chapter 2 and Psalm 23, which we sang as the hymn *The King of love my Shepherd is*. And so I'll be mixing my metaphors as well.

As the priest in this benefice, I spend most of my Sunday mornings doing what I'm doing now: presiding at the Eucharist, the Holy Communion. That is at the heart of our coming in, as Christ's flock in the Acle & Bure to Yare Benefice. Later we'll have our Annual Parochial Church Meetings and deal with a lot of institutional stuff; but now, as most of us do regularly throughout the year, we come together to listen to the voice of our shepherd (as we also do in our lay-led worship) and to gather around the table he spreads before us – for while the sheep in Jesus' metaphor have to go out to find pasture, we come in to him to be fed. And, as in the psalm, we find that here there is ample, indeed more than enough for our needs, because it is God who is providing. Out there, in our PCCs, our church accounts, in the challenges of life, we may feel there's a scarcity of resources; but when we come in to God, through Jesus the gate, there is abundant grace: *anointed with oil* we are welcomed and accepted; and our *cup overflows*. For Palestinian sheep, the fold was a place of security overnight from thieves and wild animals. Jesus said, *Whoever enters by me will be saved*. At the heart of our faith is a place of security and salvation, whatever we are facing out there.

This place of security isn't just for us as individuals: it's a place of shared security. In Ezekiel, the Lord rebuked the kings, or shepherds of Israel, for their failure to have a special care for the straggler, the weak and the injured; in the Acts of the Apostles, the infant Christian community – Luke's ideal church – looks to the needs of all. In our congregations we make space for one another; and for those I referred to last week, those on the edge of our churches, who might well have drawn near because they sense that through our gate is a place of sensitive welcome. At its root, that's what safeguarding is about; set aside for a moment anything that might frustrate you about it: safeguarding is about being a secure place for the vulnerable; and, at the same time, a place of conditional welcome for those who may have caused harm to others in the past. Henry Baker inserts into his rendering of Psalm 23 a reference to the finding of the lost sheep.

The welcome and sustenance we receive are not to keep us here. It is not yet time for us to *dwell in the house of the Lord for ever*. Rather, our souls restored and revived, the Eucharist usually ends, *Go in peace to love and serve the Lord*. We go out through Christ, the gate for the sheep. The Son did not remain in the safety of the heavenly fold, but came down with a special care for the straggler, the weak and the injured, that all may have life and have it abundantly. And so, like the flock leaving the fold to find pasture, we follow our shepherd in mission; as Jesus will go on to say, he has other sheep who need to hear his voice. One might say that although we have been fed in Christ's fold, a church is equally sustained by its going out into the fields, because a church that doesn't do that is going to be malnourished: more like a club that exists only for the benefit of its members.

Although it might appear to concentrate on internal affairs, an Annual Parochial Church Meeting is partly a *going out* sort of activity. The report stage of the meeting is about us giving an account of our stewardship: Parochial Church Councils prepare reports for those on the wider Electoral Roll; and follow procedures which seek to assure others that we are to be trusted (in handling money, or our custody of ancient buildings, or in safeguarding) and that we are worthy of our inherited charitable status.

If that feels like it's becoming more challenging, I think it is. Partly because the work is increasingly distributed among fewer people, many of whom are reducing in their capacity to do it. And partly because the Church is losing its privileged position in society and being treated just like other, secular organisations. What feels difficult, or an imposition, to many in the Church, is nothing unusual to those who currently work or volunteer in schools or national charities.

But leaving the safety and security of the fold was never guaranteed to be easy. It wasn't for the Good Shepherd, who ended up laying down his life for the sheep. And while Henry Baker's psalm-hymn promises *verdant pastures* and *streams of living water*, there remains the prospect of *death's dark vale*: in the Christian life there will be difficult terrain to negotiate. The promise of the Good Shepherd is not to avoid such challenges, but to lead us through them, guiding and strengthening.

So in this Eucharist and in the meeting which follows, let us thank God for all that has been and is life-giving in our going out and our coming in, together; and pray that the acceptance and joy of that life may be evident to others, that the Lord may *add to our number* those whom he is saving today. And let us recommit ourselves to our following of the Good Shepherd, the gate to life abundant and eternal.