

SERMON FOR the 4th Sunday in Easter 3.5.20

ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD

REV JORDAN GREATBATCH

On a dank Monday evening many months ago, a Romanian shepherd called Ghita left home with his sheep. He wasn't in a lorry but on foot, accompanied by several angajati, or hired men, some shaggy dogs, and seven donkeys loaded with gear. Ghita was off on his autumn transhumance (which is the seasonal movement of people with their livestock between fixed summer and winter pastures) Ghita was heading north for his winter pastures. It would take him six weeks.

For a country whose defining myth revolves around shepherds, Romania isn't all that keen on its pastoralists. The Ballad of the Little Sheep (Miorita) tells of a herdsman who lets himself be murdered by two rival shepherds even though one of his lambs, who has miraculously acquired the power of speech, warns him in advance. Miorita is sometimes taken as a metaphor for Christianity, another way of showing Christ's courage in turning the other cheek. It's also

said to mirror the experience of the Romanian people who have endured numerous invasions, occupations and humiliations without, it is claimed, ever losing their identity.

When Romanians were agitating for independence in the 19th Century, Transylvanian shepherds were seen as the rugged pioneers of the nationalist movement. Long before then, they had established shortcuts over the Carpathian Mountains to seasonal grazing in what is now Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria, the Caucasus, southern Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Poland and the Czech Republic. Having crossed from Hungarian and Habsburg lands into Ottoman Turkey and Russia, they returned home to their more isolated communities with information, ideas and ambitions fired by the world outside.

A shepherd's CV has to offer some crucial USPs (unique selling position): caringness, self-reliance and dedication. He - and it's almost always a he, although in real life women did the same job - is synonymous with the kindly ideals of Christianity and for that matter Islam - but for all that, he is a humble, often solitary, sometimes rootless figure.

And as we imbibe that image of the Romanian shepherd, we are struck by its many similarities to the Christ image. Image and images are an important part of John's gospel which our passage is from today. The image of shepherd is very much rooted in the First Testament; it is used throughout the Psalms in particular to identify God as the one who cares for his people.

Jesus' use of this image for himself is particularly rich. It connects him not only with the God of Israel, but also uses imagery which was a part of everyday life in ancient Israel.

We can't help but be impacted by that notion of Jesus as the roaming shepherd. And in this passage we are confronted with a Jesus who epitomises the Shepherd mentality. Someone whose absolute care is placed upon his sheep, a lifestyle which like those of the Romanian shepherds is itinerant, unsettled and often difficult.

But this passage does not deal with the niceties of Jesus as what we may call the Good Shepherd, but something more difficult. For centuries the interpretation of the parable has been problematic. It has often promoted a view that "all who came

before" Jesus were less than worthy. This sort of interpretation can degrade Israel's history and its religious institution to merely something that had its purpose but can now be discarded with in the light of Jesus. I feel if we go too far down that track it can misguide our reading of such texts.

I feel that a better way to approach the text is the simple notion that it is perilous to follow the wrong shepherd. Jesus confronts us in this passage and redirects our vision, and asks who are we following? Is it our security in our wealth? Is it our consumerism? Who are we following? Christ the Shepherd or someone else? The imagery however does not stop there.

For Jesus also identifies himself as 'the gate'. The gate brings to mind something that separates those on the inside from those on the outside, for purposes of protection of privilege.

Read this way, Jesus is the one who determines those who are deemed worthy of the kingdom, and it is him that calls.

But have we the church, become the gatekeeper and Jesus the gate to protect the morally weak and

vulnerable within the fold or to privilege a community of the ethically pure? Is the church the hospital for sinners, as Augustine believed or society of the morally perfect as many have thought.

This passage opens up a variety of theological questions. Ones I believe we have to come to terms with ourselves. Is Jesus alone the gate, so that, in the end, every different flock will be made one in him? I'd like to hope so.

I'd liked to hope that Jesus' call is for all, even those who deny him in this life. But we, we who believe get to hear his voice, here and now, and rejoice in Jesus, the Shepherd who leads us to life, and life abundant.

For those Romanian Shepherds like Ghita, the journey is often fraught and dangerous, but at the end, the pasture is green and lush. I think the church would be helped if it could reinforce the idea of Jesus as the shepherd, not just the gate and gatekeeper.

In ancient Christian art, by the fourth century Jesus the shepherd was gradually replaced by Jesus as "Almighty" or "All-powerful", the elevated ruler over all, as Constantine united the church with the

secular state. As the church became an expression of imperial power, the shepherd's staff was replaced with a gilded crosier; a crown of thorns was displaced by the triple tiara of the pope. Recovering shepherding imagery could call the church to simplicity, sacrifice and solidarity, needed in a time when many have lost their way.

Could we be a church that acknowledges there are many different folds and respect other viewpoints? Not losing our identity as Christ followers, but offering an expansive view of God's saving grace.

Only we can bring this about, as God leads us forward in humility and love, for he is our shepherd.