

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	26 April 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Fourth Sunday of Easter
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Dr Earl Collins, Chancellor

This Sunday is often called 'Good Shepherd Sunday' on account of the Gospel we have just heard. Yet, I must admit to feeling some embarrassment when it comes to preaching on it, since it is so focused on sheep and shepherds. I was brought up in a housing estate in Belfast and have lived much of my life in cities. To be perfectly honest, I have never worked with sheep in my life. Indeed my only experience of them has been looking across a fence or sitting in frustration in a car behind a flock of sheep ambling its way up a country road.

However, we don't have any reason to believe that Our Lord was much of a shepherd either, at least in the literal sense. In his hometown of Nazareth, he was probably a carpenter, or as scholars nowadays tend to think, more likely a builder. His childhood, complete with him carrying planks, is beautifully depicted in the window above us. But as with all his colourful parables, Jesus drew on the experience of his hearers to teach them something about God. The image he used was hardly a new one for his hearers – in the Old Testament God is repeatedly called the Shepherd of Israel. It is a metaphor and like all metaphors likely to be misunderstood if taken too literally. That is what happened here, as they failed to understand him. In response Jesus turned to another metaphor because the people whom he addressed evidently couldn't get what he was saying to them.

With his first metaphor he described for them an ideal shepherd, clearly a reference to himself (which he also explained later). The ideal shepherd, Jesus said, is the one who knows his sheep so well that he can call each one by their own name. We might recall here that on Easter Sunday morning, in his first appearance after his resurrection - to Mary Magdalene - she recognised Jesus only when he spoke her name, 'Mary!'

So, it is also with us. Jesus calls each one of us by name. We are not invited into some general connection with a shadowy being called 'God.' We are rather invited by God into a personal relationship with him, into a friendship with Jesus, who is God with us. When we pray, we invoke the name of Jesus, just as we have done today in the Collect, praying to the Father through Jesus Christ our Lord, because Jesus creates a unique personal relationship between God and each one of us.

God loves each of us as though we were the only person on the planet. He calls us by our name, when we listen carefully to his Word in Scripture and wait for him in prayer. Not that we will hear any physical voice, but rather, over time we become more aware that God is mysteriously present to us, however invisibly, like the air we breathe. Unfortunately, however, as so often, Jesus' audience did not really hear what he was saying, so he changed the metaphor.

In addition to the suggestive image of a shepherd, he also described himself in another way - as the gate of the sheepfold, this time very explicitly, saying, 'I am the gate.' But in the Gospel according to St John, every time we hear those two little words, 'I am,' we should be very alert.

'I am,' was for Jews the very name of God himself, the Name above all Names. God announced it to Moses, who, at the burning bush at Mt Sinai, had asked God who he should tell the people of Isarel had appeared to him. For Jews, 'I am' was and still is the holiest of all names, so holy indeed that only the High Priest dared to pronounce

it, once a year on the Day of Atonement, when he went into the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

Yet Jesus frequently used it about himself. That was one of the things that got him into trouble and ultimately got him killed. His opponents said that although he was a mere man like them, he was making himself equal to God.

In this Gospel passage he says, 'I am the Gate.' A gate offers a point of access, through which we can go in and out, providing it is not locked. Jesus is the gate opened wide between God and humanity. Through him God came to meet us and through him we are enabled to go and meet God. Because he is simultaneously divine and human, God's Word made flesh, Jesus is the perfect point of contact between God and us. As St Paul said, Jesus is the Mediator between God and human beings.

Not only therefore is Jesus the ideal shepherd, leading, guiding and nourishing us with his Word and his sacramental body and blood in Holy Communion. He is also our perfect access point to God. We hear his promise today that he has come so that we may life and have it abundantly. The abundant life that Jesus gives begins here and now through faith. But it will reach perfection after death when we are admitted by him to the full vision of God our Father. We will soon pray, in the beautiful words of the Prayer Book, that through this Holy Communion today we may evermore dwell in Christ and he in us.

Receiving these holy mysteries in Holy Communion is the pledge of that fullness of life Jesus our Good Shepherd gives us, when we enter through him into union with God our Father. May he bring us to that fullness of life and joy, today and forever. Amen.