

# Jesus Never Ceases to Be the Sheep Gate

## Biblical Reflection for the 4th Sunday of Easter

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By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, MAY 10, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://Zenit.org)).- Of all the images of Jesus throughout the ages, what shows his tenderness and compassion more than the Good Shepherd?

Even before Jesus' time, the image of shepherd was used to describe the tenderness and provident care God shows us. Shepherd and host are both images set against the background of the desert, where the protector of the sheep is also the protector of the desert traveler, offering hospitality and safety from enemies.

In the Bible and the ancient Near East, "shepherd" was often used as a political title to stress a king's obligation to provide for his subjects. The title connoted concern for and dedication to others. The image of the shepherd also expresses great authority.

The entire Good Shepherd discourse (John 10:1-21) from which is drawn today's Gospel text, continues the theme of critique on the Pharisees at the end of Chapter 9. Nourishing the flock means that the shepherd must protect them from heresy, ever ready to defend the sheep from marauders. The shepherd's rod is a defensive weapon against wild animals, while the staff is a supportive instrument symbolizing care and loyalty.

### **Entering God's presence**

Before we consider the significance of the sheep gate, let us recall that in ancient Israel, the gates of Zion symbolized the very idea of entrance into God's presence. When Isaiah speaks of the day of universal peace he describes it as a time when God's "gates shall stand open constantly; day and night they shall not be closed" (Isaiah 60:11).

Likewise, the altar of holocausts was placed not within the tabernacle, but "in front of the entrance of the Dwelling of the meeting tent" (Exodus 40:6). Christ is the fulfillment of all these expectations: He is the door through which we have "access to the Father" (Ephesians 2: 18). He is the "new and living way" (Hebrews 10:20).

How often do we repeat the words of the Psalmist, especially during the Advent season (24:7-10): "Lift up your heads, O gates; / rise up, you ancient portals, / that the king of glory may enter. / Who is this king of glory? / The LORD, a mighty warrior, / the LORD,

mighty in battle. / Lift up your heads, O gates; / rise up, you ancient portals, / that the king of glory may enter. / Who is this king of glory? / The LORD of hosts is the king of glory.”

### **Of Shepherds and sheepfolds**

In today’s Gospel (John 1:1-10), Jesus makes references to two types of sheepfolds before he identifies himself as the sheep gate. In the first two verses he describes the kind of “communal sheepfold” that each village would maintain and to which the shepherds might return their flocks each night. The pen was protected by a strong door that could be opened only by the chief shepherd’s key.

The second type of sheepfold is described in subsequent verses. Such a containment was provided for those nights when the sheep were to be kept in the fields (as on the night of Jesus’ birth). Such temporary sheepfolds usually consisted of a circle of rocks, with an opening at one end. The shepherd himself would serve as the gate to such sheepfolds, laying across its entrance to sleep. Whether a sheep tried to leave or a wolf tried to enter, they would have to do so by way of the shepherd himself! The shepherd himself was the door.

It is important to remember that Jesus first identifies himself, not as the Good Shepherd, but as the gate for the sheep. In the ancient walls of Jerusalem, there was a gate on the north of the city, by which animals were brought in from the surrounding areas for sacrifice. It was called the sheep gate.

Once inside the city and within the temple courts, there was only one door where the sheep went in, and no lamb ever came back out after entering the temple precincts. They traveled in only one direction, and there they were sacrificed for the sins of human beings.

For that first audience who heard Jesus’ teaching about sheep, such knowledge added to the shock of his words: “I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. ... I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture” (John 10:7,9). In the very temple area filled with sheep on their way to slaughter, Jesus declared there was a way out: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11).

Jesus speaks of sheep in the very place where they were about to be slaughtered. Unlike the shepherd among innocent lambs in many of our imaginary scenes of sheep and shepherds on verdant hillsides, tending these sheep requires something more than a gentle hand and a watchful eye. They must be protected from the powers of death.

Jesus teaches that anyone who does not enter into the sheepfold to care for the sheep through this gate — Jesus himself — is a thief and a bandit. No one comes to the Father except through him. Jesus himself is the gate by which the shepherd goes to the sheep, therefore the only authentic shepherds are those admitted by him. In verses 7-8, the figure is of a gate for the shepherd to come to the sheep; in verses 9-10, the figure is of a gate for the sheep to come in and go out. The Pharisees, since they do not come through Jesus, are thieves. Those who come through this gate that is Jesus will have life.

## **Loyal protector**

Jesus is the water of life, the bread of life and the gate of life. Jesus is the model (good) shepherd in three ways. First of all, he is willing to lay down his life for his sheep. The Pharisees are hirelings who shear the sheep but have no loyalty to them. The faithful shepherd, like David of old, protects his flock.

Second, he knows his sheep. This intimate knowledge of his flock, which involves love and long night watches, is his reason for laying down his life for them. And his love goes out beyond “his own sheep” of the Johannine community to others who believe in him.

Third, Jesus is the gate of the sheepfold — not a trap door, but rather the entrance into the loving security of God — into the protection of the good shepherd.

Christ is not only the door; he is the king who enters and the temple to whom the door leads! In ancient times the “door to heaven” was the sky from which God gave us manna (Psalm 78:22), but now Christ is the true bread come down from heaven (Nicodemus).

Jacob saw the “the gateway to heaven” (Genesis 28:17) in the earthly shrine at Bethel, but when the martyr Stephen gazes at the door to heaven he sees “glory of God and Jesus” (Acts 7:55). Christ not only invites us to enter the Kingdom of heaven through him, he even leaves the keys to his apostles, assuring them that “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18-20).

## **Hope of humanity**

I cannot help but recall one of the teachings of Blessed John Paul II on today’s Gospel passage during World Youth Day 1993 in Denver, Colorado. During the Vigil on Aug. 14, 1993, in Denver’s Cherry Creek State Park, the Holy Father said:

“In Jesus Christ, the Father expresses the whole truth concerning creation. We believe that in the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus the Father reveals all his love for humanity. That is why Christ calls himself ‘the sheep gate’ (John 10:7). As the gate, he stands guard over the creatures entrusted to him. He leads them to the good pastures: ‘I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be safe. He will go in and out, and find pasture’ (10:9). [...]

“As the Third Millennium approaches, the Church knows that the Good Shepherd continues, as always, to be the sure hope of humanity. Jesus Christ never ceases to be the ‘sheep gate.’ And despite the history of humanity’s sins against life, he never ceases to repeat with the same vigor and love: ‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly’ (John 10:10). [...]

“Christ — the Good Shepherd — is present among us, among the peoples, nations, generations and races, as the One who ‘lays down his life for the sheep.’ [...] Yes, the Good Shepherd lays down his life. But only to take it up again (John 10:17). And in the new life of the Resurrection, he has become — in the words of St. Paul — ‘a life-giving spirit’ (1 Corinthians 15:45), who can now bestow the gift of Life on all who believe in him.

“Life laid down — Life taken up again — Life given. In him, we have that Life which he has in the unity of the Father and of the Holy Spirit. If we believe in him. If we are one with him through love, remembering that ‘whoever loves God must also love his brother’ (1 John 4:21).”

### **Reflection questions**

Jesus says that the sheep will know the voice of their shepherd, and that they will not follow a stranger. How well do I listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd? Where do I seek to hear Him? Do I follow where He leads?

Jesus says that He has come that we might have life, and have it abundantly. What does He mean by this? Do I live the abundant life that God has prepared for me?

Jesus says that He has other sheep that do not belong to the fold, but that must also come in. By this many scholars believe He meant the Gentiles who were not awaiting the Messiah but would receive the Good News with joy. Who are the sheep in today’s world that must come into God’s sheepfold? What are we doing to bring them to Christ?