

Homily 4th Sunday of Easter 2026

“Well, I never!”

‘I am the gate of the sheepfold.’ ‘What on earth was Jesus meaning by this in today’s Gospel?’, I hear you say! First, we know that ‘I am’ statements in St John’s are tantamount to saying, ‘I am God’. In The Book of Exodus when Moses asked God, ‘Who shall I tell the people sent me?’, God answered, ‘Tell them **“I am who I am”** sent you!’

In Palestine in Jesus’ day, shepherds were humble but diligent pastors of their sheep. They knew each sheep by name, the sheep staying with the shepherd throughout their lives. Shepherds were greatly attached to their sheep leading them to feed in green and lush pastures. Armed with a club the shepherd would go ahead of the sheep to ward off predators, willing to risk life and limb for the flock. The shepherd also carried a crook, a sling and a little pouch full of stones. At night the shepherd would lead the sheep to a sheepfold but, unlike our pens today, the sheepfold would have no gate but an exposed opening across which the shepherd would sleep at night. To all intents and purposes, the shepherd WAS the gate of the sheepfold: protecting the sheep; being ever ready should one try to wander off; deterring wild animals from entering the fold; checking the sheep one by one in the morning, with his crook, for wounds or infection. So, when Jesus states, **‘I am** the gate of the sheepfold’, he is saying, **‘I am God**, who calls you by your name, you are mine. **I am God** your protector, your ever faithful stronghold and shield, your defender from harm, your divine saviour who lays down his life for you, your heavenly physician who ministers to you, your ever watchful guardian and rescuer should you wonder into danger.

Shepherds worked in family teams and so if a sheep did wander off the shepherd would leave ‘the other ninety-nine’ with another shepherd to seek out the one which was lost or injured. The community of shepherds would celebrate its safe return. If a sheep began to stray from the flock a stone delivered accurately by the sling would act as a ‘sheep dog’ and guide the stray back to the fold.

Today, as we listen to or sing The Responsorial Psalm, we will hopefully appreciate more fully the richness of the image of Jesus as Good Shepherd. So let us slowly meditate on the words of Psalm 23 with fresh ears:

The LORD is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want. Fresh and green are the pastures where he gives me repose. Near restful waters he leads me; to revive my drooping spirit. He guides me along the right paths; He is true to his name. If I should walk in the valley of darkness, no evil would I fear, for you are there with Your crook and your staff with these you give me comfort. You have prepared a banquet for me in the sight of my foes. My head you have anointed with oil; my cup is overflowing. Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me all the days of my life. In the LORD’s own house shall I dwell for ever and ever.

St Peter, in today’s Second Reading, emphasises the ultimate sacrifice The Good Shepherd makes for his sheep. The Good Shepherd dies on the Cross for our sins to return us safely to the fold ‘...for you were straying like sheep but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.’ How stunningly beautiful is that? Who would have thought a simple statement, like ‘I am the gate of the sheepfold.’ Has such deep meaning? “Well, I never!”, I hear you say.