

To the people of Palestine, their wealth was measured in sheep and cattle. So security against theft was very important. Each town had a communal sheepfold that contained combined flocks. The sheepfold had a strong door with a secure lock and key. The flocks were separated by the peculiar call of each shepherd. Every sheep in his flock was known to the shepherd because they spent a long time on the hillside being raised for wool and not for meat. This intimacy of the flock with the shepherd meant that the sheep would not follow a stranger (v5). Jesus uses this everyday image to proclaim 'I am the gate' in verses seven and nine.

However, evil rides upon the back of good and Satan seeks to direct people into a duplicate, but false, sheepfold. Also, false messiahs will try to gain access and control in the spiritual sheepfold, the Church. In exile on Patmos, John speaks of his vision of the holy city of God- on no day will its gates ever be shut for nothing impure will enter it nor will anyone who is deceitful or does anything shameful but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life' Rev. 21 25ff. Indeed, Jesus promises that the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

In verse 6, his hearers fail to understand Jesus' teaching about false voices pulling them away from God. They see themselves as children of Abraham who are not in need of salvation. The same opinion, churchgoers might echo today. In fact, when Jesus says 'I am the gate: whoever enters through me will be saved' (v9), the typical English response is 'Really, I didn't know that!'

1. Jesus is the gateway to God
2. Jesus is the door to sustaining pastures. He gives us the freedom to become the person God intended us to be. There is a sense of security in going in and coming out of the heavenly places when we are taken there during prayer and worship.
3. Jesus provides safety around the door of the sheepfold. This means that Satan is barred from heaven. Jesus becomes our defence against evil and is able to enter our troubled state in difficult times.

Some people live in gated communities in the UK. They existed in Palestine in Jesus' day in the time of Herod. Sepphoris, Tiberias and Caesarea were where the action was but Jesus ignored them because their gated communities were closed to God. Instead, Jesus chose to work in Galilee in the golden triangle of Chozarin, Capernaum and Bethsaida. They became the primary places for his teaching and witness. Why? The fact is that they were true communities, small enough for people to know everyone else. Houses joined around a small courtyard, the synagogue being the most prominent building. Extended families lived together, adding rooms as families grew up and then their children were added. Meals, celebrations, morals, marketing, business, politics, worship, all went on among interconnected houses in a maze of built-on Built together houses. They had a lot to do together, a lot to do with God. This was the sheepfold that Jesus envisaged for us, his sheep-A vision of God's kingdom on Earth for which he is the gate to life that we may have it to the full (v10).

Alex Marshall