

**Old Testament lesson:** The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm

**New Testament lesson:** John 10:1-10

Writer Kari Myers tells of an Episcopal priest who was leading a tour of the Holy Land. He and his parishioners were bouncing along a lonely dirt road when their Palestinian driver slowed to a stop. A flock of sheep was blocking the road. Behind the sheep was man yelling and beating them with something like a leather whip. He was trying to make them move ahead. Dismayed, the priest said to the driver, “This is contrary to everything I have ever read in the Bible about a shepherd. I thought a shepherd was supposed to lead and the sheep would follow.” The driver smiled and said, “He’s not a shepherd. He owns the meat market!”<sup>1</sup>

Who should we follow? Those who were in the Sunday school class about the Comino trek, know to follow the arrow. But Jesus did not use the Comino images. He used the sheepfold gate and the gate keeper.

When Jesus says, “Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit,” he’s warning us about who to follow and who to stay clear of when it comes to our spiritual growth and nurture.

In Jesus’ time, the spiritual growth and nurture of the people was the responsibility of the Jewish religious leaders, who also interpreted and enforced the laws of their society, kind of like our government. There was no separation between religious and secular laws, except for the laws that were added by the Romans.

This made things quite complicated. Who were they to follow – the Pharisees, the Roman government, or spiritual teachers like Jesus?

We have the same question today. Who do we follow in maintaining our spiritual health and integrity – the church, the spirituality movement, or the government with its restrictions on questions like abortion, the death penalty, same-sex marriage, and other moral issues?

There is no easy answer. The answer wasn’t easy in Jesus’ day, and it’s not easy today. But the answer is the same. “The one who enters by the gate,” says Jesus, “is the shepherd of the sheep.” Well, that’s clear isn’t it? Maybe not. John tells us the people struggled to be faithful followers of Jesus back then just like we struggle to discern and follow God’s will today. Listen to what Jesus says about discerning God’s will.

“I am the gate for the sheep.” “All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.homileticsonline.com>

That's our first clue in figuring out who to follow, who is leading us closer to God's will. It says "Whoever enters by me (by Jesus) will... come in and go out and find pasture."

Coming in and going out – that's freedom! Those who follow Christ have a freedom in Christ that helps us to deal faithfully with any and all issues or questions.

We can be confident in questions about abortion, the death penalty, same-sex marriage, and the like because we have confidence in the almighty power of God and the grace and mercy of the Lord.

When we faithfully seek the will of Christ in any issue or question, we are free to follow our conscience AND free to allow others to follow theirs, even if they differ with us, believe something different. Through our healthy and faithful debate and discussion, God will sort it out. In the grace and mercy of the Lord, we do not need to force the issue, whatever it may be. We just speak our mind, having discerned God's will.

It doesn't even have to be a major social issue. More personal questions like how to make ends meet and still give of ourselves for the sake of others are covered in the care and provision we receive from God.

Here's how God cares for us and provides for our needs through Jesus Christ. "The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice."

In other words, Jesus (the gate) is our entryway into the faith, given to us out of God's love for us. We are the sheep who hear the voice of Jesus guiding us day by day, step by step. Jesus knows us by name – knows you by name – and can therefore be counted on to lead us in the path of righteousness, faithfulness. Our job is to listen and follow.

Of course, not everyone is a follower of Jesus. And in fact, none of us can be said to follow Jesus perfectly. We all stray from the path from time to time. When we're trying to get back on track, it matters where we turn for guidance and direction! Society tells us we just need more money, the right clothing or body shape, more free time from work or school.

Christianity tells us we need more faith that God will provide, more acceptance of ourselves and others, more devotion to our calling as servants of the Lord. When we follow the path laid out by society at the expense of our faith, there is no freedom in that. We get held captive by our love of money, fashion or outward beauty and acceptance, and other temptations and bad habits that get between us and God.

The key to getting back on track is to know all that the Lord provides for us and be content with that, take joy in that.

Jesus not only provide us the freedom to come in and go out – to move through life with quiet confidence – but in Christ, we also have all the provision and protection of what he calls the pasture, the place where sheep feed off the land in safety and abundance.

When choosing between following Christ and following the crowd, the choice is easy. It is only Christ who provides us both the freedom of coming and going – of being ourselves as his followers – and the peace and security of green pastures – of God's provision.

Society can give us lots of freedoms, but they come at the expense of our security. Or we can be made very secure in society, but then we have fewer and fewer freedoms. If you are looking to society to tell you how to live your life, you're going to be disappointed one way or another – it's a choice between freedom or security.

But if we live our life according to the teachings of Jesus, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the love of God, we have both freedom and security – freedom in the grace and mercy of the Lord and security in the love and provision of God.

Let that be your measure – our measure – of what's right and what's wrong, what's healthy and what's not. We are called to share with one another the forgiveness of Lord and the abundant blessings of God.

And in that, we have the freedom to be ourselves – to be who God calls us to be – and the security of God's blessings shared and used to help others be the best they can be. Amen.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

O God, we have but one life. We spend our days trying to save it, lengthen it, protect it and hold onto it.

The truth is that life – real life – doesn't come from our human striving. We can't eat, exercise or medicate our way to abundant life.

Help us to see that you, Jesus, hold out to us everything we are longing for. Give us a longing and a hunger for you and everything that you offer.

Our lives are truly yours, O Lord. Thank you for life and for your presence in our lives. Help us to be faithful to your teachings, and particularly those teachings reflected in the prayer that you taught us, singing:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive  
our debtors;  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**