

## 20140511FourthSundayOfEasterSermon

It amazes me that every year as I mark the assignments of the TEE students the questions and answers seem to fit in with the liturgical calendar. For example I'm busy tutoring the class on the doctrine of the Trinity and Trinity Sunday looms just a few weeks away. The current assignment I've just finished marking asked the students to help a young man whose father had been abusive to find another way of addressing God because he had trouble calling God "Father". They were asked to define and use an alternate metaphor, simile or anthropomorphism. The most popular answer was to address God as "Shepherd" instead of "Father". We did exactly that as we sung [said] our Psalm a few moments ago.

Using Metaphors, similes or anthropomorphisms can be good and helpful for us to understand difficult teachings but they do present problems. Firstly, we must remember that these are merely human created images trying to define a divine subject.

Secondly, there is a cultural divide between what fitted into normal life 2000 years ago and could be misconstrued today. A good example is the city dweller and the use of agricultural images – such as sheep and shepherds we have in today's Gospel. For example, I don't think I've ever been near enough to a sheep to touch it and I don't think I've consciously ever met a shepherd. Or what about that classical Jesus statement about the rich entering the Kingdom of Heaven being as easy as a camel passing through the eye of a needle? Biblical scholars are still debating that one and what it means.

Thirdly, there is the time and geographic lapse. For example, how sheep were herded in Middle East 2000 years ago is perhaps different from our image of sheep and shepherding. Most of us will think of the English shepherd and his Sheep Dog, green dales and a barking border collie shepherding the flock at the command of his owner; or perhaps the vast flocks of sheep we see in the Karoo. Basically what I'm saying is that images used in the bible need interpretation.

The interpretation of a bible passage is called Exegesis. It is a technical term meaning the critical interpretation of a biblical text. The exegesis reminds me of the apocryphal story of a Cape Town student at the College of the Transfiguration who spent the first two weeks of his time there wondering who was this 'extra Jesus' the lecturer were talking about!

There are many different ways of doing exegesis. Let me share some of them with you this morning. Firstly, there is **Social Criticism**. This would look at how things were done in the time the book was written. For example: how sheep were herded in the Middle East in Jesus' day. Unlike what we see today, shepherd didn't drive the sheep from behind with a sheep dog nipping at the sheep's trotters but rather the shepherd took the lead and calling out the names of the sheep so that they would follow him. He would lead them out from the Kraal/enclosure where they had overnights in order to protect from wild animals. Being aware of these differences from the way sheep are herded today, helps us to understand Jesus' parable more.

A second way of doing exegesis is by using **Historical Criticism**. This method doesn't apply to today's gospel but for example in Isaiah's call and vision in chapter 6 of his book of prophecy it says that his vision occurred "in the year King Uzziah died". This historical fact enables us to place his call on to a timeline and to realise that if he was called at that point, he could not have been around when King Cyrus of Persia released the Jews from exile. The conclusion is then drawn that there must be at least two if not three authors of the Book of the prophet Isaiah.

A third way is **Redaction Criticism**, which looks closely at the text itself in a critical way. For example: – why are there two creation stories in Genesis chapter 1 and 2? These were written by two different authors from two different perspectives. These multiple sources were redacted into a single book we call Genesis.

In our Gospel today there seem to be two separate parables. The first is a warning against people who would want to steal the sheep. The second focuses on the relationship between the sheep and their shepherd. Now although we call this Sunday 'Good Shepherd Sunday', the central image today is not so much that of the shepherd as of the gate. In fact, later on when Jesus explains the parable to his disciples he says, "I AM the Gate".

So here it would seem that Jesus is the Gate of the sheepfold, while the shepherds who come in and out are pastors who are faithful to Jesus. Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, is dangerous and should be avoided. He is “a thief and a bandit” as our translation dramatically put it, who comes to steal and do harm to the sheep. The genuine shepherd, however, enters by the Gate (Jesus). He is recognised and admitted by the watchman (the leader of the community?) at the gate. The sheep hear and recognise and follow their shepherd’s voice. In a sheepfold where there are the sheep of many shepherds, the true shepherd knows which ones belong to him. He calls them out one by one. They, recognising the voice of their own shepherd, follow him. They will not follow other shepherds, even if called by them.

I hope you noticed that it is a free relationship. The sheep go in and out. They follow, not because they are forced to but by their own choice. The other sheep (belonging to other shepherds) stay behind. When the shepherd has brought out his sheep to pasture, he goes ahead. And they follow because “they know his voice”. They will not follow a stranger but run away from him, because they do not recognise his voice.

A final way of doing exegesis is through **Hermeneutical Criticism**. This is Interpreting text in order to learn from it. Today the disciples didn’t understand the parable so Jesus had to explain further. Whenever we read the bible we are carrying out, to a greater or lesser degree, hermeneutical criticism. It is what we all should do when we read the bible. We should ask “Who wrote it, Why did he write it, How did the first readers understand it, How should we understand it today?” When we do that and answer those questions we are doing exegesis, we are in fact doing theology.

The disciples’ lack of understanding of parables was fairly common in the synoptic Gospels especially in Mark. You see, parables are meant for “insiders” and not “outsiders”. So in our Gospel reading Jesus spells out more clearly what he means. He is the Gate of the sheepfold. Those who enter the sheepfold by any other way are not to be trusted, they are “thieves and bandits”. And the sheep will ignore them. “Anyone who enters through me [i.e. the Gate] will be safe,” says Jesus.

Many of Jesus’ warnings in today’s Gospel should be read in the context of the story of the blind man which immediately precedes this parable in chapter 9 of John’s gospel. There Jesus condemns the blindness of the Pharisees as religious leaders who are totally unfit to bring people to God. They are not good shepherds and they refuse to enter by the Gate.

The passage ends with one of Jesus’ most beautiful statements: “I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.” But this needs some exegesis, too. To follow Jesus is not, as some seem to fear, to live a half life, a life filled with endlessly dire warnings of “Thou shalt not” and “Don’t!”. It is to live life, our human life, to the greatest possible fullness. As has been said in the past, “The Gospel is a statement about how human life is best lived.” “Life with God is good for human beings and should be seen to be so.” True evangelism consists in making this clear to others by the way we speak and live. So many people, unfortunately, have the impression that there is something “unnatural” or “super-natural” in being a Christian. One has to be a weirdo or at least a saint to be a Christian. If that is the way people see Christians then somehow we are not doing our job properly.

I hope you enjoyed your short trip into the world of theology. I hope you saw it was not only for those with their collars back to front. Another question I’ve just finished marking dealt with a bible study group that said that it only wanted to pray, worship and study the bible and not do theology. The students were asked to write a letter to that group to convince them that as soon as we start talking about and thinking about God we all become theologians. As soon as we read our scriptures asking those questions I mentioned earlier we become biblical scholars and theologians. When we do this regularly and diligently we start to have life and have it to the full.