

4th Sunday of Easter 2008

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I am the bread of life. I am the living water. I am the light of the world. I am the vine. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the Way, the truth and the life. These are some of the beautiful images that John's gospel gives us to describe who Jesus is for those who believe in him. They are very relational images. They speak of nourishment, vision, connection, guidance, protection. They are very evocative images and even if we don't have any hands on experience of sheep herding, shearing, guarding etc. the image does speak to us. Perhaps that is why the 23rd psalm, "the lord is my shepherd there is nothing I shall want" is the most familiar and beloved of all 150 psalms.

But then we get today's image. I am the "sheepgate". Not quite as evocative as the rest. In fact it can make us stop and scratch our heads "I am the sheepgate" What does that mean? So I googled sheepgate and this is what I found.

During Jesus' time, shepherds protected their flocks with their own bodies. A sheep pen was merely a wall of loosely connected rocks with a single entrance. At night the shepherd slept across the entrance so that his body became a protection for the sheep from their own straying or from marauders. The body of the shepherd kept the sheep from wandering out and getting hurt as well as kept animals and bandits from entering the pen and attacking the sheep.

Well, that's a pretty evocative image. That works. Jesus whose body protects us from danger and harm. I also thought about the word gate. In the Spanish it's puerta. Same as the word for door and harbor. Jesus is the way in. and Jesus is the way out!

Given the googling and the gate (puerta, porte,) I come up with a new image of Jesus in contemporary language. I am the webportal. Whoever double clicks on me will enter a virtual world of love, of relationship, of insight, of meaning, of challenge, of compassion. But there is a cost to enter through this webportal. It will cost you nothing less than your life. For if you enter through this gate, you must be willing to give as I give, to shepherd as I shepherd, to see and hear as I see and hear the cries of the sheep with whom you have been entrusted.

But do you trust every webportal you go through. What's on the other side? Is it in fact a thief and a robber who will mislead you, ask you for your credit

card number and then scam you? How do we know that the explanation of the sheep gate on the web is true and trustworthy, for example? God knows there is an extraordinary amount of false and deceptive information you can get on the internet.

Why even think about a virtual Jesus? Even though there was no world wide web 200 years ago, that's what those early followers of Jesus had to struggle with. Sometimes it seems like the experience of Jesus Risen from the dead was a virtual experience. He's there but he's not really there. He appears out of nowhere but he is there. The disciples hear his voice and recognize it. One moment he's with them on the road, interpreting the scriptures and breaking bread with them on the journey to Emmaus and then poof he vanishes. This can sound like a virtual Jesus.

But the spirit of God reveals something else.

The Holy Spirit reveals that the risen Jesus is with us and is real presence for us. Jesus is not "way out" but "way in", deep within our human experience of suffering, pain, joy, community, love. You name it. Jesus gives his life for us in love. In eucharist, in bread and wine, in service to others, in community of believers gathered, he's there. You don't need to double click on Jesus. He's as really present in this world as you and I. More so. Sometimes the voice of Jesus comes across loud and clear. Sometimes it's just a whisper. Sometimes it's as if Jesus is sitting right beside us. As if... As if...more than "as if". The Spirit reveals that Jesus "is" with us. Look within and without. Enter through the gate who is Jesus. The Spirit opens your eyes to see, your ears to hear, your hands to hold, your mouth to speak "Jesus".