

“I am the sheep gate...I am the gate,” says Jesus, in John chapter 10.

Gatekeepers – doorkeepers – people who watch and wait and protect – these are characteristics of leaders. These are characteristics of shepherds. These are the characteristics of Christians, of anyone who follows Jesus, that gatekeeper, the gateway *par excellence*.

Our news media these days is filled with lead stories of gatekeepers, shepherds, people who have abused others and consequently have abused their place in our church. It is also filled with stories of chief shepherds, bishops, who apparently have not watched well the conduct of those in their charge. This is demoralizing for all of us Catholics. We are all tarnished, hurt, demeaned by the actions of our brothers and sisters.

As I pray about this, I am drawn to some imagery in the life of Jesus. Clearly Jesus came to a point in his life where he became disappointed, disillusioned by the actions of those who led his Jewish faith in the area in which he lived. In his own preaching, the gospels record his cautioning of his followers, that while they were to follow the teachings of their leaders, they were not to imitate their actions. In my prayer I ask the Lord a simple

question: “Lord, how did you deal with the disillusionment you felt in your religious leaders?” And in the asking of the question I am reduced to silence, to listening, to be quiet, open to whatever the Father will respond. “Lord, did you listen for the answer your Father gave you?” “Lord, how did you find the courage to take the actions you did in response to your feelings of betrayal by the leaders you admired?”

I can somehow imagine Jesus alone in a quiet moment, perhaps over a number of years asking, listening, praying, and in his heart receiving the answers, the spirit which enabled him to live and act in the freedom that sets us all free.

As I pray and listen out of these questions, I have no immediate answer. I do not know what the future holds. But I do know who holds the future – the same Father in whom Jesus trusted. The same God who raised Jesus from the dead is available in the power of the Spirit to give us the life we need as individuals, as a Church, as a nation, as a world in search of peace.

By praying out of these sorts of questions, Jesus truly becomes the gate – the sheep gate through which we can enter and leave and find pasture.

Who are the shepherds of our day? Shepherds are pastors or caretakers who offer nourishment, protection, and teaching according to the values of the

family, the tribe, the nation, society or church. Is the mother shepherd to a family? The bishop to a diocese? The teacher, medic, electrician, civil leader or meteorologist to people in his or her area of responsibility? Of course. So what's the point? Nourishment and safety are accomplished by the skill and trustworthiness of the shepherd or leader. When leaders default, trust erodes. When a leader turns bad, trustworthiness does too. What enhances trust? Acting in the interest of the whole, speaking the truth, admitting sin, the lack of courage and infidelity, and asking forgiveness.

Knowing how much depends on it, individuals and groups test the trustworthiness of leaders. Leaders, for their part, are open to truth and act accordingly with individuals and groups. Leaders receive truth however it comes, communicating it appropriately to all, even when doing so may require turning around to go in another direction. A person who fails to take responsibility for the truth or denies it to the individuals or groups is not a leader but a stranger: "The sheep will not follow the stranger but will run away, because they don't recognize the voice."

May we enter and leave through the gate that is Jesus and so come to the Father and receive from our good and gracious God the strength in our leaders and the leadership we need. We ask all this through Christ our Lord.

"I am the sheep gate...I am the gate,"
says Jesus in John, chapter 10.