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“Amen, amen, I say to you, I am the gate for the sheep” (John 10:8).

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Ps 23; 1 Pet 2:20b-25; John 10:1-10

When Thomas Aquinas summarized his theology (*Summa*), he placed the mystery of the Incarnation at the center as the source and destination of all his ideas about the Christian life, especially the Sacraments, how Jesus engages and transforms us. Without the Incarnation and our belief that Jesus is truly divine and truly human, every other claim falls apart. From Aristotle, Thomas knew that “a small mistake at the beginning is a big mistake at the end.”

Today’s Gospel from John, the fourth and latest of the theological reflections on Jesus, we are given a glimpse into the most crucial phase of the life of the early church, the period when the mystery of Jesus, who he was and is and the implications of his life, death and resurrection for humanity, were being explored. It would be two more centuries before church councils would begin to define the key Christological questions, but at the time the fourth Gospel was being written, the truth of Jesus’ identity as God and Man was being fiercely debated.

What would later be condemned as heresies were already infecting the first communities, including those established by Paul, who was constantly dealing with charlatans and false teachers, and by John, whose letters repeatedly warn against the antichrists, other church figures he saw as distorting the Gospel. It was critical to get it right. A small error at the start would rob the world of the Good News. Jesus

was more than a heroic man elevated by God as a model to imitate or a divine visitor in human guise showing us how to live good lives. Jesus was and is God, fully human and fully divine.

When Jesus says that he is the “Gate” for the sheepfold, he is using another metaphor for the basic claim of John’s Gospel, beginning in the Prologue that Jesus is the eternal Incarnate Word through whom Creation itself was formed. As the *Logos*, the authentic template for reality, Jesus imprints the image and likeness of God on all things, the source of essential truth, oneness, goodness and beauty. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, another expression for this same “gatekeeping” role.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus calls false teachers who distort this fundamental truth “thieves and robbers” who enter the fold to deceive and destroy the sheep. Only the true shepherd calls the sheep by name, for his voice alone resonates within them as authentic. The sheep pass freely in and out of the fold through the Gate, which is Jesus himself, the one who guards them and guides them to pasture, which is abundant life. Only by passing through the Gate, the Incarnate Word, are we transformed to find new life.

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is more accessible to our imaginations and emotions, but the underlying theology is crucial to understanding how profound and astonishing the claims of the Gospel really are. Because of Jesus’ humanity, our human nature has been opened to new life beyond the limits of our earthly, physical existence. By incorporation into his life at baptism, our humanity is united to his humanity and we are enabled to share in his risen life and his divinity. Abundant life is life with God, begun in us here and now, unfolding and active. This is our Easter faith. This is the joy of the Gospel.

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