

## St Thomas-on-The Bourne

Easter IV | Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> April 2026

*John 10.1-10*

### **HEDGEHOGS, HOSPITALITY & ABUNDANT LIFE**

The other day, my family and I visited the British Wildlife Centre. Five-year-old Hector, already animal-obsessed, is now buzzing with new facts about deer, foxes and weasels, while two-year-old Flora has happily discovered otters and candyfloss-flavoured ice-cream. But the highlight was the talk on hedgehogs. We were all staggered to learn that, from a 1950s peak population of 30 *million*, there are now only around 700,000 hedgehogs in England, and hedgehogs may be extinct in the wild within the next ten years. Threats include loss of habitat, too many cars driving too fast, and overuse of pesticides diminishing their available diet.

It was hard not to hear this as a metaphor for the Church of England. Struggling to navigate the threats around us, and struggling to find our feet in a world which sometimes feels like it has overtaken us, we too have been predicted to vanish over the coming decades. But it was when the keeper started talking about how we can each, individually, help hedgehogs to thrive that the analogy really came to life – and spoke, to me at least, into the heart of today’s powerful, hugely important reading from the Gospel of St John.

Specifically, the keeper explained that many visitors complain about a lack of hedgehogs in their own gardens. “We’re doing everything right!” they protest. “We’ve left the grass long and encouraged insects for the hedgehogs to eat! We’ve put out bits of cat food to attract them in! Why don’t they come?!” “Probably,” the keeper replies, “because your garden is surrounded by thick, impenetrable, six-foot-high fencing. Try cutting a little hole near the bottom, and see what happens.”

“Jesus said to them, “‘Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.’” The image of shepherd as good leader was well-understood from the Hebrew

Scriptures and the Roman Empire, but here Jesus takes things considerably further. In describing himself as the gate, he not only makes clear that there is a right path for everybody, a very deliberate and specific way of sheep entering the fold, but he illustrates for his disciples, not least for us today, what welcome and hospitality look like. There is no point, the passage seems to imply, in having a beautiful home or garden or church, unless those seeking are welcomed in. Here, then, is the first challenge I hear in today's Gospel, not least as the Church of England struggles like the hedgehog population: what does our gate look like, and to whom is it open? That is about our physical and verbal welcome, of course, but it goes beyond that, to the power balances which give a place its particular flavour, and to the micro-expressions which might betray how we truly feel about the stranger in our midst, the noisy child who wants to stay near the front, the person who shouts "alleluia!" in an otherwise staid BCP Eucharist. I am preaching to the converted here, for this parish and this benefice do welcome with genuine warmth and love, but there is perhaps space for us to think about how and for whom our hospitality is tailored – for, with the best will in the world, a hedgehog will always struggle to scale a six-foot fence.

Of course, Jesus' words go far beyond the importance of invitation and welcome. His colourful language of thieves and bandits, of "climbing in by another way", suggests that – more broadly than the nature of our arrival – there is a right and wrong way of doing things. This is challenging language, perhaps most to those churches and people, like this one and me, who consider ourselves "inclusive". We are eager to emphasise that all are welcome and all are loved, that God made us who and how we are – and this is right, and important, and Christ-like. But it is also right, and important, and Christ-like to call out wrong behaviour, to show that, under that umbrella of unconditional love, there are good and bad decisions, good and bad ways of living. Determining and defining what those are can be tricky and controversial, but Scripture does give us some clear pointers. Let's take an obvious and topical one: war versus peace. The Holy Father recently found himself under attack by the US President when he suggested that there was "a better way" for global politics, by which he

meant the unequivocal pursuit of peace – for which, in turn, the Vice-President told the Pope to “be careful” when talking about theology. Putting aside just how extraordinary these scenes are, and conscious not only that we will be diverse in our politics, but also of the attack on the US President yesterday, I would nonetheless challenge any Christian to argue that war is better than peace. Our Lord said to his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” There is not only a right way, then, to welcome others, but a right way to *treat* others, too, and a right way to live.

And that right way is, of course, Jesus Christ. Our role as his disciples is to follow him not just on Sundays, not just in reading the Bible privately, but to follow him dynamically, publicly, confidently, loudly – in his own word, “abundantly”. If we know that everything on offer in our garden is precisely what the hedgehogs out there need, why would we not welcome them with open arms? If we know that the treasures of our garden are the way not only to a happier life on earth, but to an eternal life of greater treasure in a greater garden, why would we not tell everyone precisely where to find the gate? If we truly believe in him, and that he offers us the greatest joy and richest justice and deepest love that can be experienced, why would we not want everyone else to believe in him, too? In calling us to have abundant life, Our Lord calls us also to be abundant in our witness and our evangelism, in our generosity and our welcome, and in our love for all. And, where we do, trends reverse: for here, in this loving and inviting benefice, we are seeing hopeful seeds of growth, just as we are seeing across our country. The hedgehogs, it seems, are starting to understand the threats around them, the many unconvincing promises and unfair challenges of earthly existence, and are reaching out for the better way of which the Holy Father and the Son of God so eloquently speak.

Never is there a better time to recommit our hearts to this, than in Eastertide. As Tom Wright so brilliantly challenges us, Easter must be more than “simply the one-day happy ending tacked on to forty days of fasting and gloom”. Rather, Easter is the day when God’s new creation begins, when we see for the first time what that final joining-together of earth and heaven looks like, and it is the pattern for our whole, welcoming, abundant

lives. So, as the sun streams through the windows on another beautiful, God-given day, as we prepare to once again see earth and heaven joined together in the Body and Blood of the gate-opening God of abundant life, perhaps we can each renew our determination to live out the Easter faith, to declare loudly the faith that welcomes and uplifts, and to show the love of God in our every encounter. And perhaps we can cut holes in our garden fences, too.

Amen.