

The Shepherd & Lover of My Soul.

Psalm 23

John 10:7-16 TM

Over these first few Sunday messages we have exalted Jesus as the Hope of the Nations, reminded ourselves of how precious we are to Father God, and seen that hearts set on pilgrimage are the bread of our journey. Today I want to remind you that Jesus is the Great Shepherd of His sheep (us) and the Lover of our souls. Relationships / Relationships / Relationships: evangelism is relational and so too Jesus shows us is any kind of Christian leadership: His Sheep recognise His voice. Tourists often marvel at the powers of eastern shepherds to call their sheep to them when two or three flocks have mingled. Now I've met leaders who confess that they don't like people; one wonders why - and how - they are in leadership! The contrast between Jesus and the Pharisees is clear: their malicious treatment of the man born blind which John records in the previous chapter and their willingness to parade the women caught in adultery demonstrates that they were more concerned with theoretical discussion and the pompous strutting of professional leadership than with the care of people. Can I say to you that for Lorna and I this is not a job but a calling, and we are here for the long haul to help lead and shape this congregation to be the Body of Christ.

Now the Pharisees were particularly worried about Jesus: he had not been trained at their City Colleges but had mud on his shoes and a ready way with country imagery. The Pharisees saw themselves as the Shepherds of the people keeping them safe within the law of God. After all, they believed it was only by keeping the details of the law that a person could please God. So they were outraged when Jesus claimed that He himself was the only way of gaining access to God's favour. He was the Gate by which the sheep, the ordinary people, could enter God's sheepfold where there was freedom and security (v9). You see a sheepfold only ever had one entrance. So the Pharisees rightly understood

what He was saying: keeping the law was not a 'way in'. In fact Jesus spelled out to them that the so called 'shepherds' of Israel were no better than the sheep rustlers or uncaring temporary farmhands, claiming to know another way into God's favour. The good leader protects the flock whereas the robbers abandon it to the wolves. Ultimately, the Good Shepherd lays down his or her life for the sheep.

By contrast to the Middle East, a holiday in Scotland is never complete without the experience of sheep! There are few Shepherds so the sheep are left to wander around: and one quickly realises that sheep are silly creatures, unpredictable and in a world of their own. Left to themselves sheep will wonder and stray to where it isn't safe (the lost sheep parable in Luke 15 shows how common that was). Also they might choke if they drink from the fast running water (that's why He leads them besides still water). Now you may find this description of sheep a touch familiar and a bit uncomfortable for Jesus chooses to describe us as sheep too and perhaps reluctantly we must agree that He has a point! Mark 6:34 describes Jesus responding to human need: 'He had compassion on them because they were like Sheep without a Shepherd'.

So let's meet the Shepherd (in the context of Palestine): The job could not be further from the glamorous picture we conjure in our minds: blond boy in a hillside in the sun with a pipe! It's rough, dirty, and uncomfortable. There is work to be done in all weathers and at all hours. It takes physical strength and dedication. It's a tough job because the sheep are so stupid and stubborn, with a tendency to wander off into dangerous situations from which they need to be rescued. No wonder Jesus said that humans were like sheep!

The Shepherd leads (Psalm 23, 10:3/4/5) through dangerous and difficult country and he does it by the Sheep knowing His voice. The Shepherd protects (10:7) against wild animals and is the door to the sheepfold. The Shepherd cares (10:3): a close relationship

develops; He knows each sheep by name (so its never hey you or you in the post frock)! We really matter to Him! So the Shepherd knows if just one is missing (even though there might be more than 100 in the flock) and will go and search personally for them (Luke 15). The Shepherd loves his Sheep and understands them despite. He is watchful, resourceful, and courageous yet loving patient and sacrificial too. Looked after by the Shepherd the sheep are secure.

In the reading from John we find a further 'I am' saying of Jesus, which are like windows into the Character of God: and what a claim! I am (the) Good Shepherd. (Psalm 80:1 speaking of God says: Hear us O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock). Jesus' claim was clear: it was a claim to deity and a contrasting of himself with the unfaithful leaders of Israel (the Pharisees would have been livid listening!). Many years before, Jeremiah had warned that false shepherds were leading Israel astray and had promised that God would send Good shepherds to look after them (23:1): woe to the Shepherds of Israel who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture declares the Lord. And in 23:4 he looks forward to a different kind of Shepherd being raised up. Good in the Greek is 'Kalos' which literally means attractive. Nothing weak, feeble or anaemic about this picture of Jesus. This is not the 'pale Galilean' or the 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' of the sentimentalist.

Ultimately the Good Shepherd lays down His life for His Sheep (10:11) a thought captured beautifully in David's Psalm 23. So when Jesus said to the Crowd: 'I am the Good Shepherd' He was offering to be their leader, and amongst other things to provide them with **security, satisfaction and unity**: he offers the same to you and me, His Children today.

***So fellow sheep: how would you like to follow this Shepherd?
Say: Bah! If you would!***

1. Security: not a new burglar alarm but a Saviour.

"I am (the) Gate, whoever enters through me will be saved"

(10:9).

Sheep need the security of the Sheepfold. When we belong to Jesus we shall hear His voice, and He will speak to us personally (v3), and lead us and go before us (v4), and we shall know His Voice, and know when others would draw us away (v5). This security and safety in Christ is possible only because the Good Shepherd 'is willing to die for His Sheep'. A Bad Shepherd runs away if there is any sign of dangerous animals. Looking after himself is more important than looking after His sheep. The Good Shepherd gives up His own life to rescue His Sheep. Jesus could have avoided the confrontation, which would inevitably lead to His death, but he chose to give His Life for us. So beware of 'hired Shepherds' (v12/13) who are more interested in pay packets than the well being of the flock. The difference between Jesus and leaders who are not worth following shows when the 'wolf' of hardship or persecution comes. Leaders whose ambition is self-centred 'take the money and run' but Jesus stayed and died out of love for His followers, winning then eternal life (v15). Beware of 'thieves and robbers' (v8): false messiahs and prophets. There is no coercion, brain washing or deception in Jesus' invitation to follow. So beware of any religious leader who presents faith in this way (v1, Ezekiel 34:4). Jesus' call is personal (v3), recognizable (v4), and open to acceptance or rejection (v4). Good for the sheep that they did not listen to the sheep stealers (v8). There is and never will be any security in religious leaders who have not come to Christ and who destroy a persons relationship to Jesus Christ by destructive teaching and inconsistent lives. Ism's come and Ism's go but Christianity is no philosophy of live with a series of impossible promises - it's a new life itself, and a security that the world cannot give. Receive that Security!!!! Proverbs 16:3 says Commit to the Lord what ever you do and your plans will succeed.

2. Satisfaction: the Rolling Stones sang I can't get no satisfaction! But Christ satisfies the deepest longings of the human heart because He created the heart in the first place: and that satisfaction is not just for a moment but for eternity! Those who attack Christianity will often do so on the grounds that it is narrow and if a person becomes a Christian they will forfeit their enjoyment of life. But Jesus says that the opposite is true. Those who try to draw us away from Him are those who come to 'steal, kill and destroy' (v10). A boy or girl, man or women persuaded against their better judgement to commit immorality does not thereby enter into a full satisfying new life. Indeed the experience of those who have fallen in this particular way is that something good has been 'lost, killed and destroyed'. Those who come to Jesus on the other hand, are promised the security of being saved or delivered from spiritual death (v9), and satisfaction from being able to 'come in and go out and find pasture'. "I have come," said Jesus, "in order that you might have life - life in all its fullness (real and eternal life, more and better life that they ever dreamed of)"(v10). From the day I said yes to Jesus: my life took off! In those days it was like going from monochrome to glorious Technicolor. Many forces try to steal us away from Jesus - materialism, success, and sensation. In the end they lead to spiritual death (v10). Jesus is indeed the Gate to life: the only route to a full and satisfying life! So as we follow the Shepherd, however hard the way, because we know that He will lead us on to find more and more satisfaction in Him. As Paul put it: I've learned to be content whatever the circumstances (Philippians 4:11). Once your trust in Him is on this basis you will also find He will use you in ways that are more than you could ask or even imagine: its called the adventure of faith.

3. Unity: But Jesus was not only concerned about those in the fold (Jews: the people of Israel) but those outside organised

religion (Gentiles). There are, in His words, the other sheep that belong to me that are not in the sheepfold. I must bring them, too; they will listen to my Voice, and they will become One Flock with One Shepherd (v16). Jesus came to bring mankind together by bringing people first, not into the same fold but into the same flock - that is, into relationship to Himself, the Good Shepherd. We need to hear that and receive it and embrace all who acknowledge Jesus as their Shepherd. There is but One Church across Planet Earth and it's called the Body of Christ, one Church in Canterbury with the same name, of which we are one congregation. Denominations are sadly part of our spiritual history in the UK, but when they turn into denominationalism the alarm bells need to ring. Jesus died to break down barriers that divide and we need to be ever watchful that we don't erect them again.

We are just about to consider new Elders so this Jesus model is highly relevant: I Peter 5:2 refers to Elders/Christian leaders as Under-Shepherds: accountable to the Chief & Good Shepherd: Jesus. Those who would be under-Shepherds in the flock of God exist for the care and protection and for the development and nurture, of God's people. In a personality-driven culture, it's astonishing to see how quickly leaders can begin to take on a persona of their own. But the notion of a celebrity shepherd is nothing short of madness. Please don't ever see me in those terms: I will always lead you to rely on Jesus. To be an under-shepherd is to endure hard work, sleepless nights, frustration, and a battle with wolves here and there. This is the responsibility - and indeed the privilege - of leadership, Jesus style. Ultimately the way of the Pharisees was works whereas the way of the Good Shepherd was grace.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is the Lover of my soul and yours too. To miss out on that experiential gift and grace would be as tragic

as the underlying reality of this story: A public reading contest took place where all the contestants needed to read Psalm 23. An Actor recited the psalm powerfully and without flaw. Towards the end of the contest an elderly clergyman read the psalm with a faltering voice. The prize was given to him. The clergyman said to the actor that he was sorry the Actor had not won as he read the psalm so well. The actor responded: there was one big difference: I knew the Psalm but you know the Shepherd!

So do you know the Shepherd? Does He guide protect and lead you? Do you hear his voice?

If you are feeling just a little sheepish then why not consult Him?

Perhaps as we minister grace to one another as we share communion let's cry out to the Lover of our Souls to renew our security in Him, our satisfaction given from Him, and our Unity across the Jesus Flock.

Pastor David

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