



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

The Good Shepherd

By Rev Dr Keith Garner

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John 10:11-18

11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

12 The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. **13** The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. **14** "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. **15** just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep. **16** I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. **17** The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life--only to take it up again. **18** No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

On this fourth Sunday of Easter, our attention is drawn to John's Gospel and to the tenth chapter. Here we find a description of the Good Shepherd which is a well-known and popular image of Jesus in the gospels and a commanding passage in terms of the mission of the Christian community. One writer said, "The Good Shepherd is one of the most familiar images of Jesus and all the more demanding of theological attention, for the familiar too easily becomes the routine and its range of meanings narrowed."

Much of my ministry has been spent at the heart of towns or cities, but for nine years in addition to a large suburban church I had care of a very small church in the countryside of North Yorkshire. Within that congregation was a man who had been a shepherd for most of his working life. I had some fascinating conversations with him and, as one who had been mostly an urbanite, it was good to learn more about this important profession.

We would need to ask ourselves whether we have over-sentimentalised the biblical shepherd image. Shepherding is a demanding and dangerous task and, in the biblical context of Israel/Palestine, it was not only an everyday sight, but also carried with it enormous spiritual and religious significance. This Eastern and rural image has a great deal to say to us, even in an urban, industrialised and technological world.

I enjoy listening to the songs of the shearers. In Australian history, shepherds and sheep shearers have had a very significant part to play. Working conditions for such people in nineteenth century Australia were far from good. Wool was one of Australia's largest industries but as the wool industry grew so did the number and influence of shearers.

In 1890, the Australian Shearers Union boasted tens of thousands of members and at their annual conference in Bourke a huge conflict about working conditions began. Galvanising

squatters and their workers, they formed what was endearingly called 'the Pastoralists' Federal Council'. The sum of this is bound up in the development of the Trade Union Movement in Australia, but the point I make is that sheep, shepherds and shearers have a very different kind of history from the kindly pastoral scene that often attends the shepherd.

We must put the passage in John's Gospel into its wider context, for Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd who truly cares for his sheep. In some parts of the world this particular Sunday is identified as Good Shepherd Sunday and there is an abundance of music, prayers and literature to underpin this theme.

The prophets of the Old Testament referred to the image of shepherd when they spoke about corrupt political leaders. They were described as the 'bad shepherds'. The concept of the 'watchman' is closely identified with that of the shepherd.

The people had trusted in false promises made by bad shepherds, only to be abandoned to more powerful nations, and to exile in Babylon. In that context, the prophet Ezekiel spoke of God as the only true Shepherd, whose standards of justice and what we call human rights are both reliable and unchanging.

We also remind ourselves that David, who was widely acknowledged to be Israel's greatest king, started his life as a common shepherd. The thoughts we find in Psalm 23, perhaps the best known passage in the whole Bible, are attributed to David.

The goodness of Jesus is an attractive goodness. William Temple, in his inspirational notes on John's Gospel, talked about it being possible "to be morally good repulsively". Jesus, on the other hand, is exactly the opposite and expresses his love with the added dimension of his sacrificial life. Jesus is totally in control of his life; and death for him won't mean defeat and how different this is from the other so-called spiritual shepherds of the day.

TEXT: John 10:11

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

We must resist much of the sentimental luggage that is attached to the concept of shepherd, and understand this image in the context of John's Gospel and the very selective way in which he approaches the ministry of Jesus.

John uses carefully sculpted pictures and models them to tell the story of the life that Jesus Christ brings. The Gospel of John emphasises the Person of Jesus Christ as well as his work.

In examining the Gospel of John, we are presented with a series of what are known as 'signs' which demonstrate the powerful activity of Christ in the world. These are the fourth gospel's equivalent of the miracles in the synoptics. There are also seven statements about the Person of Jesus Christ, known as 'I Am' sayings.

Our text today is the fourth in the list of 'I Am' statements. We meet One who lays down his life for the sheep and this points to the reason why he came and lived among us. Such a shepherd cares for his sheep daily, watching, feeding and protecting them. But in the end,

he will deal with the greatest danger of all – and the cross becomes the way he lays his life down to gain victory over evil and all that is wrong.

As the risen Lord, Jesus will call his disciples to take on a shepherding ministry themselves. We see this in the post-resurrection appearance and his conversation with and reinstatement of Peter in John 21.

The whole chapter has been wrestling with the imagery of sheep. The meaning would be all too obvious to the biblical audience, for whom sheep were an everyday sight.

The Old Testament description of bad shepherds, against which Jesus is compared as the Good Shepherd, comes from the prophecies of Ezekiel and Isaiah.

In Ezekiel 34, we are given a picture of shepherds who only take care of themselves, demonstrated in verse 2, where we read “Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?” In Isaiah 56, we have a similar theme where shepherds are seen to be looking only to their own needs.

It is all too easy to relate the theme of shepherd to bishops, priests and pastors and not to see that all of us have a part in this ministry of the shepherd. Having been involved for many years with those who are distinctively set apart in a ministry of shepherding, I would want to suggest we all have a part to play in supporting with loving care those who are engaged in such ministry.

When Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd, what did he mean? What are the marks of a good shepherd? These are interesting questions to consider. We may be tempted to restrict our thoughts to scenes from the eastern regions of New Zealand and the pastoral scenes of the Scottish highlands, but the image of shepherd carries immense force, even in our own city culture, when explored in the true biblical setting.

I found some challenging thoughts when exploring this theme. I read that “Jesus’ words about being the good shepherd in John 10 offer comfort, but not without first depicting the cost at which the comfort is purchased.”

THE GOOD SHEPHERD IS A PICTURE OF COMMITMENT

Jesus Christ was committed to the kingdom of God, even to the extent of laying down his life. The death of Jesus is not a last minute strategy or an act of desperation. He is not being forced into an unexpected death – his total ministry is focused upon this single intention to express his love for the whole world.

We do well to note the complete contrast between the Old Testament and the new covenant in Jesus Christ. Under the old way, the sheep died for the shepherd, but now the Good Shepherd dies for the sheep. Jesus did not die as a martyr, but as One who willingly lays down his life for us.

A classic Christian book on the 23rd Psalm was written by Philip Keller and published in 1970. Once a shepherd himself, he wrote “A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23” and relates his

own experiences as a shepherd to the biblical picture and a deeper understanding about sheep. He wrote:

“The strange thing about sheep is that because of their very makeup, it is almost impossible for them to be made to lie down, unless certain requirements are met.”

He went on to outline four particular conditions that must be present before sheep would lie down:

- The sheep must, due to their timidity, be free from all fear
- The sheep must, because of their sociability, be free from friction with other sheep in the fold
- The sheep must be free from flies or parasites if they are to relax
- The sheep will not lie down until they are free from hunger.

Keller concluded the section by saying, “And it is only the shepherd who can provide release from all these anxieties.” These constructive thoughts from a man who understood the role of a shepherd first hand offer great insight into how we can engage as shepherds of God’s people.

Jesus speaks about wolves and thieves who do not have the same compassion, who are always on the look-out for the isolated, scattered and solitary sheep. Sheep separated from the flock become easy pickings for the poacher. Sheep who don’t learn the voice of the shepherd will soon follow any voice at all.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD IS THE OFFER OF A VISION OF CARE

The vision of Jesus Christ and his sheepfold is of one that is large enough for all. I find this particularly helpful because, just as the good shepherd saw his sheep as individuals and recognised their differences, so Jesus saw people in their rich variety of culture, differences of religious belief, women, men and children.

We will expand this thought by understanding that the kingdom of God and the nature of the community of Christ transcend all human barriers.

At this time in the Christian year, we recognise that we are shifting from the ‘post resurrection appearances’ to the nature of the ministry of Jesus both as it was and as it must continue to be for those of us who are his resurrection people.

You could say that Jesus puts a spin on the metaphor by setting up a contrast between the Good Shepherd and the hired hand. This picture of Jesus is one that embodies strength, power, sympathy, kindness and mercy.

In John 10, Jesus compares two kinds of shepherds. The fact is that outwardly they may look exactly the same; the skin of both will have been bronzed by the Middle-Eastern sun and weathered by the wind that would catch their faces; what they wear may look the same (actually a coat of sheep’s wool to keep them warm at night); and both would carry a staff to protect and to guide.

They may look alike, in fact you could hardly tell them apart, but only one is genuine; the other is counterfeit. It is only when danger arises that you can see the difference. The real shepherd takes responsibility and has a sense of ownership for the sheep; the counterfeit runs because to him it is only a job.

There is massive good news here, for Jesus Christ is One who is the Good Shepherd who in effect says, 'Whatever trouble comes your way, I will not leave you' and this goes all the way to him laying down his life on the cross. He will not desert us in time of trouble.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD LEADS AN OPEN AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

Jesus did not exclude people based on the standards of the day, which one writer defined as "status, lineage and physical condition".

In the earlier chapter, John 9, the Pharisees wanted to exclude a blind man that Jesus healed. By the time the gospel is in common circulation, there would be those who were concerned about what belonging to Jesus was going to mean for them in relation to both the Jewish community and the early Christian community.

The Good Shepherd could be considered a powerful image for those of us who are seeking to make connection with the society in which we live. The Good Shepherd responds by offering us an alternative to the fear, separation and insecurity that fills the lives of so many people.

Nancy Blakely brought a very helpful pastoral perspective to this ministry of the Good Shepherd and how it can influence us. She wrote, "Jesus seeks out the lost, those in need of being rescued, who are often the forgotten of our society."

We remind ourselves that the very first to hear the news of the birth of Jesus Christ were considered lowly shepherds keeping watch over flocks by night.

In a world where many voices are vying for people's attention, where many distractions can lure people from the best pathways, the promise of Christ is that he will never let us go.

- His voice reassuringly brings us back
- We belong to him
- Jesus is always going before us and leading us.

You could safely arrive at the conclusion that sheep are not the most intelligent of creatures. Here is where one of our nursery rhymes gets it so wrong. How many children have been taught the nursery rhyme 'Little Bo Peep' which confides and asserts 'Leave them alone and they'll come home, wagging their tails behind them'. Friends, it is just not so! A sheep cannot find its way home by itself.

When I lived in North Wales, the town where our home was situated lay between two mountains. Frequently, on my journey home at the end of the day, I would see sheep in the most precarious of positions, often perching on rocky ledges.

I asked myself 'How did it get there?' or even more challenging 'How will it get to safety?' It often took committed men and women to help rescue such a sheep.

People need to have the loving care of One who is always our Good Shepherd and something of his ministry needs to be part of all our lives; to think the best, to act sacrificially, and to reach out to each other in time of need.

Numbers crowd our lives. We shall soon be starting to think about the end of the financial year and filling in tax forms can be an exercise in numbers.

In our developed countries, we have to remember many numbers and the importance of the tax file number in our own culture is so important. I know from the experience of a member of our own family how hard it was to proceed with many things without establishing a number that had been set up years ago, but was lost in the system.

We are of course far more important than numbers and God sees us for who we are and loves us with an everlasting love. No-one is beyond his reach.

Jesus once told a story about a shepherd who had care of a hundred sheep, but one went astray. In our modern way of thinking, we could be persuaded that a 99% return on investment would be quite acceptable. But not for the Shepherd! And he goes in search of the one that is lost. In Mark's Gospel when Jesus was speaking to the crowds, we are told he had compassion on them because they were "as sheep without a shepherd".

In the closing hours of a weekend when here in Australia we have been thinking about our Anzac troops and the many who lost their lives one hundred years ago, we remind ourselves of that remarkable 23rd Psalm.

When women and men in every age have found themselves walking through the deepest and darkest of valleys, they have taken very seriously the promise of God's presence in such circumstances.

The shepherd is never more needed than in times of danger. In the most shadowy of places, sheep have to rely on their shepherd to take care of them. For the Christian, there are periods in our lives when we have to walk through very dark times. David is referring to the "valley of deepest darkness".

God is close at hand and, when that truth is recognised, there is no need to fear. G Campbell Morgan, commenting on the psalm, noted that when we are assured of the Lord's presence "this cancels fear".