

Jesus the good shepherd

19 March 2023

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

I wonder what you know about sheep other than the noise they make ... baa

What sheep need ... grass to eat, water to drink, safety from enemies like foxes ...

The person who looks after sheep used to be a shepherd ... a herder of sheep

In the Bible, God is sometimes called a shepherd who looks after us and cares for us ... so we are like sheep!

In today's bible reading, Jesus calls himself the good shepherd so takes on the role of God in looking out for us.

BIBLE READING

Psalm 23 (responsively)

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

He makes me lie down in green pastures,

he leads me beside quiet waters,

he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk

through the darkest valley,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely your goodness and love will follow me

all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

John chapter 10

Very truly I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep

listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger's voice. Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore Jesus said again, 'Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. But when the hired hand sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. 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.

The Jews who heard these words were again divided. Many of them said, 'He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?' But others said, 'These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'

Later there was the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. The Jews who were there gathered round Jesus, saying, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.'

Jesus answered, 'I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one.'

Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, 'I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?'

'We are not stoning you for any good work,' they replied, 'but for blasphemy,

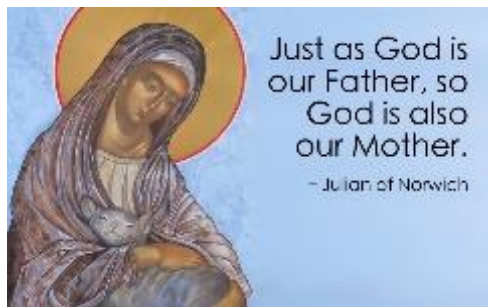
because you, a mere man, claim to be God.'

MESSAGE Jesus the good shepherd

What is God like? How would you **describe** God?

People have struggled with these questions for centuries ... and have come up with various **metaphors** and **titles** for describing what God is like.

So in the Gospel of John, for instance, God is often called **Father** ... the one who has a special relationship with Jesus the Son and who invites God's children to share that same



relationship.

We might want to add that God is also a **Mother** figure who cares compassionately for us and holds us gently when we are feeling fragile or vulnerable.



Several psalms speak of God being a **rock** or a **fortress**, somewhere safe to withdraw to when the world is threatening us.

Another metaphor for God is that of the **shepherd** who provides for the sheep and supplies them with all they need to grow and thrive. Psalm 23 picks up this imagery as God is depicted as the shepherd who supplies all our basic needs – like pasture and water for sheep – as well as security and guidance.



The psalm suggests that life will not always be easy or comfortable, though, with imagery of walking through **a dark valley** and with **enemies** close by. But there is reassurance that God's **presence** is with us – especially in these difficult times – and that God provides abundantly for us – our cup overflows with blessing.

Over time, the role of shepherd was also applied to **Israel's leaders**, based on the fact that Israel's greatest king, David, was a shepherd before he became king.

In a famous passage in **Ezekiel chapter 34**, God accuses Israel's shepherds – its leaders – of not doing their job so that the sheep – the people of Israel – have been scattered and become the prey of surrounding nations.

So God will raise up a righteous shepherd to watch over the flock ...

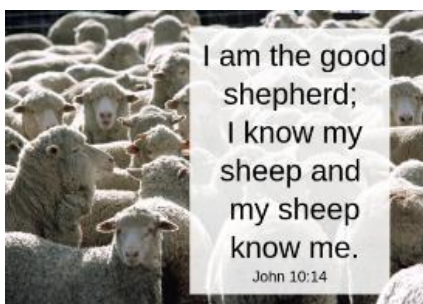
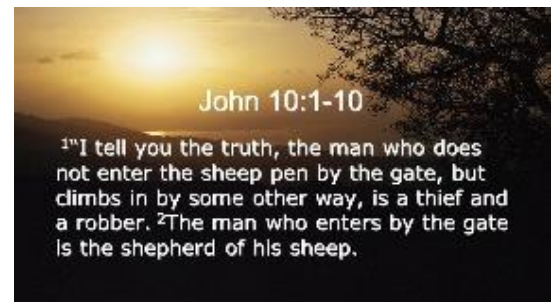
I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. (Ezekiel 34:23-24)

This hope became one of the images of the longed for Messiah, the new King David. In today's reading from John, Jesus identifies himself closely with both the shepherding role of God and the hope for a Messiah by claiming that he is in fact the good shepherd.

The first half of John chapter 10 continues the story of Jesus healing the man born blind and engaging in a heated dispute with the Pharisees. Where Jesus has been speaking about being the **light of the world** and questioning who it is who sees truly and who is really blind, he now switches to the metaphor of the **shepherd** as he continues his dispute with the Pharisees.

Who is acting like a good and trustworthy shepherd and who is more like a thief and a robber?

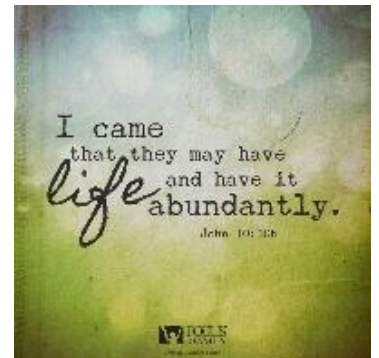
The implication is that the Pharisees with their strong focus on obeying the Law of Moses are actually **destroying** the people rather than leading them to good pasture. When danger threatens the flock, such people will run away and abandon the flock because they don't really care for the welfare of the sheep.



By contrast, Jesus suggests that he is the **good shepherd**, who cares deeply for the sheep and who knows them intimately. He calls them by name and the sheep follow Jesus because they recognise his voice – they recognise that he speaks God's words of life.

In this chapter Jesus is the both the **good shepherd** – the one who leads the sheep to pasture – as well as being the **gate** for the sheep – the way to find abundant life lived in close communion with God. This image will be picked up again in a few chapters when Jesus says he is the **way, the truth and the life**.

The **abundant life** that Jesus speaks of is more than having our physical needs met. It suggests that the way of knowing God that Jesus invites us into will satisfy our deepest **spiritual needs** – it will be true bread from heaven and living water to our souls, picking up some of John's earlier imagery. It will quench our spiritual thirst and satisfy our spiritual hunger.



There is one other important way that Jesus is the good shepherd, unlike his opponents. Jesus is willing to **lay down his life for the sheep** to bring them into the abundant life. This is the clearest suggestion yet that Jesus will need to **die** for the sake of the sheep ... to lead them from death to life and from darkness to light.



So the death of Jesus is not something unforeseen or unexpected. His opponents have been looking for an opportunity to kill Jesus for several chapters and several times pick up stones to stone him as they do again at the end of today's chapter.

But it is clear that Jesus has authority from God both to lay down his life and then to take it up again, all for the sake of bringing life to the world. If Jesus and the Father are one, as Jesus claims, this suggests that part of God's plan is for Jesus to die.

The **paradox** is that Jesus' death will bring **life** and that his death will reveal God's **glory** rather than being something shameful. That is all part of John's Easter story that he is slowly building up to.



What is clear is that those sheep who hear Jesus' voice and follow him will receive eternal life and will never perish. Their future with God is secure ... no one can snatch them from God's hand. This assurance echoes earlier words in the Gospel that ...

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up [on the cross], that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:14-17)

Given that shepherds don't feature much in our culture, what are we to make of Jesus' message of the good shepherd for us and our community?

One thing that hasn't changed is that there are many voices that clamour for our attention and that promise to lead us to the abundant life.

Among the loudest voices are **advertisers** who promise security or happiness if we will just buy this product or holiday at that exotic location.



Former American President Donald Trump taps into this longing with his slogan of **Make America Great Again**. What Trump fails to say, though, is that his plans will do nothing to help poorer Americans and those struggling to get by.

Amid all the noise, Jesus calls us to a different place, where selfishness and greed are replaced by service and prayer. As sheep, we're invited to listen to Jesus, to trust what he says and to follow his rhythm and pattern of life. As we live in this way, we may find ourselves surprised by joy and be able to point others towards its source in Jesus.

It may well be that our life remains difficult and a struggle – whether with sickness, grief or loneliness. But



the promise of Psalm 23 and Jesus' words in John chapter 10 is that even in the midst of darkness, we can still sense God's presence with us – guiding, comforting and blessing us.

Another connection is that while we are all like sheep under God's care, some of us are called to actively take on the role of shepherds over the flock. This is particularly the role of the **Minister** of course but I don't and can not do the role alone ... which is why we have **Elders** and **pastoral carers**. We are to model our leadership and pastoral care on Jesus the good shepherd.



The challenge for all those in positions of leadership is to not only provide guidance and care but also being prepared to lay down our rights and wants for the sake of others.

But the calling to look after and feed the sheep is not just for leaders. It's a call to **every** Christian who is part of Christ's community, the church. Our baptism into the faith calls **all** of us to nurture one another in faith, uphold one another in prayer and encourage one another in service – and so to help each other towards maturity in Christ. So in fact **each of us** is called to be a shepherd to those around us, taking our cues from the good shepherd, Jesus.

So may we hear Jesus' voice calling to us and may we have the courage to follow where he leads.