

"I am ... the Good Shepherd"

Sunday 1st August 2010

Rev Brian Senior

Readings:

Jeremiah 23: 1 – 6

Psalm 23

John 10: 11 - 21

What is it about sheep?

We were on holiday on the Gower peninsular in South Wales a few weeks ago, and there were times when driving around the area was quite risky. You could very easily come round a corner to discover sheep wandering about in the road in front of you.

When that happened, all you could do, really, was wait. Sounding the horn doesn't have much effect on sheep. They just ignore it, carry on doing their own thing, until eventually they mooch off to find some fresh grass.

Sheep are quite appealing animals, I think ... but they are not known for being especially bright. If there is a fence, they'll get caught in it ... if there is a bog, they'll get stuck in it ... and if there is a road, they will stand in it. They seem to have very little instinct for self-preservation, which is why they need looking after.

Karen talked last week about how a shepherd at the time of Jesus would gather his sheep, or the sheep he was looking after for the rest of the village ... and bring them into a sheepfold for the night. Then he would settle down and sleep across the entrance of the sheepfold, and become the gate.

The shepherd did this for two reasons ... to stop the sheep from wandering out, and stop any wild animals or human thieves from getting in to help themselves to a lamb supper.

In last week's reading, Jesus said: "*I am the gate for the sheep*" (John 10:7) ... because he protects us from harm.

In today's reading, Jesus says: "*I am the good shepherd*" (John 7:1 1) ... because he rescues us from trouble and leads us in the right way.

Sheep need looking after, because they are not always very sensible ... and Jesus is saying that in some ways we are bit like sheep. Do you feel insulted? Clearly it's not that we are soft and woolly and going around saying "Baaaa" ... so what did Jesus mean?

Well, people are like sheep because people get themselves into all kinds of difficult situations. Sometimes we get ourselves stuck, and sometimes we get ourselves lost, but especially, we often make wrong decisions and go in the wrong direction.

Shepherds in the Holy Land don't use dogs to help them drive the sheep in front of them, like shepherds do in England. Instead, they walk in front of the sheep, and call them to follow them. And, because the sheep know the shepherd's voice, and they trust him, most of the time they follow him because they know he will lead them to fresh green pasture.

But sometimes the sheep *don't* listen, and they *don't* follow ... and because they are not very sensible they get distracted and wander off on their own, and get themselves into trouble. They might get stuck in a thorn bush or trapped in a bog ... or they might climb up on some rocks and then discover they can't get down again. They need rescuing, just like in the Story of the Lost Sheep.

Sometimes we are much the same. Instead of being sensible, like a sheep following the shepherd, we sometimes go off on our own rather than following Jesus and doing what God says. The Bible calls it SIN, and it's serious ... because it separates us from God.

Because people need help to learn how to follow God, God has always sent people to help us. Down through history, God sent priests and prophets and wise judges to teach his people his laws and his ways, and to guide them so that they would not go astray.

God still does this today ... he gives us Bishops and Vicars and Home Group Leaders and Sunday School Teachers and Youth Leaders ... people who help us to learn more about God, and how to follow in his way.

I often look back to when I was a teenager, and remember Simon, my Pathfinder Bible Study Group Leader. He taught me so much from the Bible about following Jesus ... laying foundations of faith that are still important for me today.

I'm sure lots of us can look back and remember someone who especially helped us to learn about God and to grow as a Christian ... and hopefully we are all still ready to learn from others and to grow.

People who do this are being like shepherds for us ... helping us to follow Jesus, who is the Good Shepherd for us to follow. When someone is Ordained, the Bishop says to them:

"Priests are called to be servants and shepherds among the people to whom they are sent. With their Bishop and fellow ministers, they are to proclaim the word of the Lord and to watch for the signs of God's new creation. They are to be messengers, watchmen and stewards of the Lord; they are to teach and admonish, to feed and provide for his family, to search for his children in the wilderness of this world's temptations, and to guide them through its confusions, that they may be saved through Christ forever."

In our Old Testament reading, we learn about some religious leaders who were not doing their job. They were called to be shepherds of God's people, but instead they were destroying and scattering the sheep! Instead of caring for God's people, they were exploiting them. They were selfish and godless, and God's people were suffering.

So what should God do about it?

First, he warned these 'false shepherds' that they would be punished for the evil which they had done.

Second, he promised that at the right time he would send a better shepherd (verse 5):

"... a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land."

God promised that one would come who would save his people ... and that Saviour, of course, is Jesus – the Promised Messiah who would come and rescue his people, not only from bad leaders who didn't care for them, but from the consequences of their own sin.

So Jesus announced (John 10:11):

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

It's easy to imagine that if a shepherd was looking after his own sheep, he would take care of them and defend them as well as he possibly could, even if he risked getting hurt ... because he knew how precious the sheep were.

But what if he were a bad shepherd ... a hired hand who didn't really care that much? He is much less likely to put himself in danger, isn't he? If trouble comes ... a wolf or even a lion ... he would be much more likely to run away and leave the sheep to be scattered or killed.

That's why it's important that we understand that Jesus is the GOOD shepherd ... because he does care ... more than that, he *loves us* who are his sheep. Listen to what he said:

"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."
(John 10:14f)

That raises a very important question: Do we know him?

It's a most important question, because Jesus is talking about a two-way relationship. The sheep hear his voice and follow him because they know him and trust him ... and he cares for them and protects them since everyone is precious to him. But if they didn't know him, they wouldn't follow.

We can only truly follow Jesus if we take the time and effort to get to know him ... to learn to hear his voice through reading the Bible, through prayer, through sharing with other Christians ... or even listening to sermons! As we know him better, so we can follow him.

Jesus reminds us, too, that we are part of something much bigger. Here at St Philip's we are just a small part of the flock. There are other Churches in town, and there are other denominations too ... and Jesus is calling people all across the world, from every nation and tribe and language and culture, to follow him. We may be surprised, when Jesus comes, to discover who else he calls to meet him, along with us.

He calls us who know him together with others into one flock ... the company of all those who know and love Jesus. But we need to realise that he calls us not just as our Saviour – the one who rescues us ... but as our Lord – the one who wants to rule over our lives:

"They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."
(John 10:16)

Finally, Jesus talks about laying down his life – and taking it up again.

It was not unknown for shepherds to be hurt or even killed while doing their job. Sheep were precious, and a family's livelihood depended on them. There were fierce wild animals around, and there were thieves who would kill in order to steal the sheep, as a quick way of making money. It wasn't an easy job.

But Jesus didn't have his life taken from him. He said (John 10:18):

"No-one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."

In obedience to his Father's will, Jesus gave up his life by his own free choice, allowing himself to be crucified on the cross in our place, so that we can be forgiven.

The 'false shepherds' who heard him say this were puzzled and divided by what he said. Some thought he was demon-possessed, and others wondered if he might be speaking the truth. What do you think?

We have a choice to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, and to follow him as his obedient sheep ... or to ignore his voice, go our own way, and find that we are soon lost.

If we choose the wrong way, just coming to Church sometime, or saying that we are a Christian won't help us ... we will still be lost. If we choose the right way, we will discover that God is faithful, and that whatever troubles we may face in life, Jesus the Good Shepherd will lead us through and keep us in his love.

He is, as the song says, "The place where my hope comes from."