

Easter 4 April 25th 2021

John 10:6-21

The Good Shepherd

The reading for today was actually only supposed to be from verses 11 to verse 18 but I included the extra verses because the context here is very important. Before I go any further, I just want to acknowledge Kenneth Bailey and Ian Paul, both theologians whose thoughts and studies on this subject have been very helpful and have informed some of what I will say.

The first thing to say is that, as I am sure you are aware, the chapters in our bibles are not in the original writings. They were first introduced but the 13th century Archbishop of Canterbury Stephen Langton, who also as it happens, helped to write the Magna Carta. The trouble is that they are not always helpful, which is why we often need to read before and after a chapter to understand it better. In this case the context is that in chapter 9 Jesus has healed a blind man who has been interrogated by the Jewish Leaders and subsequently thrown out of the temple. Jesus then tells the man who He is and the man worships Jesus. Jesus makes a comment about the blind seeing and those who see becoming blind and some Pharisees heard Him and asked, “are we blind too?” It is then that Jesus goes on to talk about the Good Shepherd and His sheep and in verse 6, where we began Jesus says that this is a figure of speech – the nearest thing to a parable in John’s Gospel, because John does not usually record them.

Secondly, it is worth noting that twice in this figure of speech about the Good Shepherd Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you”. The actual translation is Amen, Amen I tell you. Now throughout the Old Testament Amen is used at the end of prayers, but Jesus uses it at the beginning of solemn statements, singly in Matthew and Mark and 25 times in this double form in the Gospel of John. It means, Certainly or It is so, or so it be and is an affirmation of a formal statement, which is why the translators of the NIV have chosen to translate it

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as Very truly. Jesus Amen Amen is perhaps a little more forceful – you need to hear this and understand it, he is saying.

And then, in verse 11, the beginning of our reading proper if you like, we have the 3rd of the “I Am” statements. “I Am the Good Shepherd”. All of the I Am statements come from images rooted in the Old Testament and of course God refers to Himself in the Old Testament as I Am, or I Am who I Am. It is pretty clear that Jesus is laying His cards on the table with these statements.

In the Old Testament Moses was a shepherd and he led his people Israel out of slavery in Egypt. And there are other images of course such as the beautiful Psalm 23. It is interesting that in their hypocrisy, the Pharisees manage to revere the figure of the shepherd in the Old Testament whilst pretty much despising the actual shepherds of their own time. For Pharisees shepherds were unclean and a sinner was either an immoral person or one who undertook certain trades – one of which was being a shepherd. Interesting then that it was shepherds in particular (unclean sinners) as well as gentile foreigners who were invited to witness Jesus’ birth.

But what about our actual passage. Jesus was talking in a parable or figure of speech to the Pharisees but His message to His followers is clear. In saying He, the Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep, He is of course alluding to His imminent crucifixion. But in verses 17 and 18 He says He will lay down His life only to take it up again. And no-one is going to take His life from Him, He will lay it down of His own accord and He has been commanded to do this and has been given the authority to do this by God the Father. This is no Gentle Jesus meek and mild. Humble, yes, always. In submission to His Father, yes, always, but this shepherd knows His flock, each one individually, and will die to save them. The hired hand will abandon the sheep, the wolf

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will attack them. But Jesus' sheep know His voice and listen only to Him. The other sheep are almost certainly us, the gentiles who would be brought in to the one flock with the Jewish believers.

All of this divided the Jews, in particular I suppose the Pharisees, who heard it. Some said He was mad, demon-possessed and should be ignored. Others argued that these were not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon, and anyway, can a demon open the eyes of the blind?

I am going to finish with a story, which a colleague reminded me of:

It is a story told about a Shakespearean actor who was known everywhere for his one-man shows of readings and recitations from the classics. He would always end his performance with a dramatic reading of Psalm 23.

Each night, without exception, as the actor began his recitation - "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want". The crowd would listen attentively. And then, at the conclusion of the Psalm, they would rise in thunderous applause in appreciation of the actor's incredible ability to bring the verse to life.

But one night, just before the actor was to offer his customary recital of Psalm 23, a young man from the audience spoke up. "Sir, do you mind if tonight I recite Psalm 23?" The actor was quite taken back by this unusual request, but he allowed the young man to come forward and stand front and centre on the stage to recite the Psalm, knowing that the ability of this unskilled youth would be no match for his own talent.

With a soft voice, the young man began to recite the words of the Psalm. When he was finished, there was no applause. There was no standing ovation as on other nights. All that could be heard was the sound of weeping. The audience had been so moved by the young man's recitation that every eye was full of tears. Amazed by what he had heard, the actor said to the youth,

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"I don't understand. I have been performing Psalm 23 for years. I have a lifetime of experience and training - but I have never been able to move an audience as you have tonight. Tell me, what is your secret?"

The young man quietly replied, "Well sir, you know the Psalm ...but I know the Shepherd."

The Lord is my Shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing.....

When our Good Shepherd, who laid down His life for us, calls each one of us by name, do we know Him well enough to hear His voice and answer His call?

Amen