

13. JESUS OUR SHEPHERD

John 10v1-16.

We should be at home with this imagery, living in Northumberland. Sheep are a familiar sight in the fields all around us. But not so much shepherds. Only occasionally do you see the shepherd and his dogs rounding up the sheep - usually on a country road when you are in your car and in a hurry.

The Eastern Shepherd

But in the land of the Bible, invariably, you see sheep and shepherd together. The sheep are not left to wander, but are closely watched over by a shepherd. It is a much more personal relationship. I recall one of my first visits to Israel riding in a tourist coach from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and out of the window seeing a shepherd in a long flowing cloak walking through a field ahead of his sheep - 50 or 60 of them. (In our country shepherds drive their sheep from behind.) I felt like Dr Who just arrived in his tardis from another century. The image is still stuck in my mind even though my camera was out of reach.

We also need to get rid of any soft and sentimental image of shepherds that have stuck from children's books of a pale Jesus dressed in sparkling white holding a fluffy lamb. Shepherds in Israel had to be tough. Their faces were dark and weather beaten and their clothes practical. Shepherds had to be able to cope with the different seasons, live and sleep outdoors much of the time and be able to be away from human company for long periods. They had to find suitable grass and water in a land that was inhospitable for much of the year.

They also had to be alert for danger from wild animals e.g. packs of savage wolves, hyenas and wild dogs. David recalled how, even as a very young shepherd, he had experience of fighting off dangerous predators (lions & bears according to 1 Samuel 17v34-35), and his skill with sling and stone had been acquired as a shepherd protecting sheep. Shepherds were employed in the army in times of war with this weapon.

The Biblical Shepherd.

Even though shepherding was a humble job, it was clothed with dignity. In Biblical history many of Israel's greatest figures had been shepherds; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses & David. Priests, prophets, princes and kings were often referred to as Israel's shepherds. And supremely, God Himself was called the Shepherd of Israel. Before anyone dared to think of Him as "Father", Almighty God was Shepherd - most famously in David's great song. Psalm 23.

But in the Hebrew Scriptures there was also a solemn note about Israel's shepherds. The prophet Ezekiel denounced the nation's leaders in his time as false and unfaithful shepherds. See Ezekiel ch.34v1-10. This is the crucial background to Jesus words in **John 10v1-16**.

v1,2. The sheepfold in view here is part of a family courtyard, or a larger enclosure in the village where several families kept their sheep. They would hire an under-

shepherd (“watchman”) to guard the gate. He would give access to the shepherds of the various flocks but guard against impostors stealing them.

v3-5. Here we see the more personal relationship between sheep and shepherd. Though the sheep are mixed in the fold they respond to their own shepherd’s voice. And we see him leading them out, literally, going ahead of them. The sheep are following not being driven.

v6. Jesus begins in cryptic, enigmatic terms. But things become clearer very soon. As we look at these next verses we will keep asking what God might be saying to us today.

1. The Gate for the Sheep (v7-10)

v7-10. What does this mean? **“I am the gate for the sheep.”** The image seems to have moved on from the village sheepfold. Now the shepherd is with his flock in the hills, and at night he keeps them in his own hillside pen. He sleeps across the entrance keeping predators out and the sheep in. He is, literally, the door of the sheep. It is a picture of a shepherd who is committed to the care of his sheep so that they are safe, well fed and content. But it is much more.

First it says that there is no other way in, except through Jesus, the gate of the sheep. He is the sole means by which the sheep may enter the safety of His fold. “I, AM the Way the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (ch.14v6)

Second, we are truly free with Jesus as the gate of the sheep. This is not captivity, it is the basis for real life. v9. The sheep **“come in and go out, and find pasture.”** They enjoy life to the full. In Robin Mark’s wonderful song “All for Jesus”, are these lines:

“All of my ambitions,
Hopes and plans
I surrender these into Your hands.
*For it is only in
Your will that I am free.*
Jesus,
All for Jesus
All I am and have and ever
Hope to be”.

Third it says that you are safe for eternity because Jesus is the gate of the sheep. When you are truly born again you cannot be saved and then lost; you cannot be unborn again! **v27-30:** “My sheep hear my voice: I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no one can 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.”

2. The Good Shepherd (v11-14)

“I AM the good shepherd.” Feel the impact of this! Everyone now knows what He is saying. Around him are prime examples of Ezekiel’s bad shepherds. They had just excommunicated a man (blind from birth and now healed) for believing in Jesus. Not only did they show no care for the sheep, they were actually harming them. But Jesus has come as the good shepherd.

Jesus is the fulfilment of Ezekiel’s prophetic declaration that God Himself would shepherd His people. Ezekiel 34v11-16. “I AM the good shepherd”. Once again notice the words “**I AM**” - the very signature of God. Jesus is again making the astonishing claim. “I AM the LORD”. “I AM Israel’s Shepherd”.

“The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” This is not some heroic gesture. “The shepherd does not die for the sheep to serve as an example, throwing himself off a cliff in a grotesque and futile display while bellowing “See how much I love you!” No, the assumption is that the sheep are in mortal danger; that in their defence the shepherd loses his life; that by his death they are saved. That, and that alone, makes him *the good shepherd*.” (D.A.Carson.) Here we have the heart of the good news. Jesus Christ came to “lay down his life”. It was a willing, voluntary, deliberate, and absolutely necessary act on His part.

“There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven, and let us in.”

3. The Sheep. (v14,15)

v14,15. “ 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.” Jesus’ sheep recognise the voice of their shepherd. Those who are not His sheep, do not. **v25,26**. Speaking later to a sceptical audience, Jesus says: “The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for 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.” The healed blind man (ch.9) was one of Christ’s sheep.

Of course this description of people like you and me as sheep is not altogether flattering. Sheep are generally considered to be rather stupid and helpless and cowardly. They easily get lost or go astray. They are docile, they lack initiative, and while they may be very cute and cuddly as lambs, when they grow up they are awkward and ungainly. No, not very flattering at all.

But Jesus is my Shepherd. Even though I am stupid He loves me! When I wander off He seeks me. When I get stuck he lifts me up. When I am in danger He comes to my rescue. Only Jesus was willing to give His life for me. Only Christ can keep and protect me for eternity. Only Jesus is with me all the time. Only Jesus can meet my deepest needs. Not only my dearest friend, my wife, can do that. “The Lord is my Shepherd”. (Psalm 23v1) I find it helpful to personalise Psalm 23 and turn it back to God as prayer.

4. Other Sheep. (v16)

v16. “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.”

Jesus is glancing back at his earlier words in v1,2. He has taken his own little flock out of the village sheep pen of Judaism. The sheep left behind are not his sheep. He has now taken His own sheep out into the dangerous world where He has committed Himself to their protection. But others are going to be added to them. His first sheep are Jewish sheep. But there are other sheep from the nations still to be added. Jesus was the longed for *Jewish* Messiah, but He did not just die for the Jewish nation. He died for people of every nation - like you and me.

“I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also.”

This is the great text on election in John’s Gospel. You do not become a sheep by believing. You believe because you are one of Christ’s sheep. They are already His before He call them. But when He does call them they respond. Preaching the gospel is integral to the calling and gathering of those who are Christ’s. Salvation comes through faith, and faith comes through hearing the message of salvation.

It is also the great missionary text in John’s Gospel. It has been called the “Battle cry of missions”. William Carey, a pioneer of the modern missionary movement, had to resist the argument of his day which said that the doctrine of election makes evangelism and missions unnecessary. On the contrary, Carey and others like him, found that this great Biblical truth encouraged them in their work. They were sure of success because Christ had other sheep. He must bring them in also. They too would listen to His voice.

John 10v16 is inscribed on David Livingstone’s tomb in Westminster Abbey because it was one of the great driving forces of his life. It has also been an inspiration to many men and women on mission. John Piper tells the story of Peter Cameron Scott to illustrate this.

“He was born in Glasgow in 1867 and became the founder of the Africa Inland Mission. But his beginnings in Africa were anything but auspicious. His first trip to Africa ended in a severe attack of malaria that sent him home. He resolved to return after recuperation. This return was especially gratifying to Scott, because this time his brother John joined him. But before long John was struck down by fever. All alone, Peter buried his brother, and in the agony of those days recommitted himself to preach the gospel in Africa. Yet again his health gave way and he had to return to England. How would he ever pull out of the desolation and depression of those days? He had pledged himself to God. But where could he find the strength to go back again to Africa? With man it was impossible! He found the strength in Westminster Abbey. David Livingstone’s tomb is there. Scott entered quietly, found his tomb, and knelt in front of it to pray. The inscription reads: OTHER SHEEP I HAVE WHICH ARE NOT OF THIS FOLD; THEM ALSO I MUST BRING. He rose from his knees with a new hope. He returned to Africa. And the mission he founded is a vibrant, growing force for the gospel today in Africa.”

(J. Piper. ‘Desiring God’ IVP. 1996)

“I have other sheep...I must bring them also.” This is a great encouragement to us in our mission. Jesus the Shepherd has many more Northumbrians yet to be

called and gathered in. This helps us when the task seems overwhelming or when men & women's hearts seem hard. Christ has more people in this County. **"They too will listen to my voice"**. When they hear His voice in the Gospel they *will* follow. This should galvanise us as we begin our "Let's Go" week in June, and start up an Alpha in Bedlington on the back of it.

"and there shall be one flock, and one shepherd." Men & women, boys & girls of every colour, nation, people-group, race & background united in Jesus Christ. All one, with Jesus as "the great shepherd of the sheep" (Hebrews 13v20), "the shepherd and overseer" of our souls (1 Peter 2v25).

John Wilthew. May 2005.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Was there something specific in this message that encouraged or provoked you, or which shed new light on this passage of Scripture? What was it?**
- 2. What do you understand by Jesus saying He is "the gate of the sheep"?**
- 3. In what supreme sense is Jesus "the good shepherd"?**
- 4. How do you feel about being compared to a sheep? What sheep-like characteristics have you shown from time to time? Come on, own up!**
- 5. Use John 10v16 as a fuel for prayer concerning your personal witness, and our Let's Go week and the Alpha initiative. There are more of Jesus' sheep out there. Let's find them, because when they hear the gospel they will respond to it.**

