

JESUS, THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Easter 4 Year A

Acts 2:42-47; Ps. 23: 1 Pt. 2:19-25; Jn. 10:1-18

Gladstone 03/05/2020

A certain prominent politician, in years gone by, (so I am reliably informed) once said to one of his adversaries across the floor of parliament, “Sir, you have the brains of a sheep.” At this, the person to whom this was addressed, took exception and demanded that the politician retract the statement. “Very well,” the politician said, “You do *not* have the brains of a sheep.”

Now, sheep, I am reliably informed, have little to recommend them in the rigours of intellectual accomplishment. Dogs can learn obedience and loyalty. Cats are too smart for that and display a mind of their own. No doubt, you will have all heard the saying: Dogs have owners, cats have staff. But sheep, it would seem, have no mind at all—as some would say. However, it appears that they do have one redeeming mental quality—that is, the ability to recognise the voice of the shepherd who provides them with safety and security. In the light of this revelation, then, the responsibility of the shepherd is a very great one, especially for those that lived in biblical times.

The image of a shepherd, who protects the sheep in his care was not something with which his disciples would have been unfamiliar. I dare say it was a common sight on the hills around Jerusalem and the surrounding Judean countryside, as Jesus and his disciples travelled from place to place—doing what they did. The allegory that Jesus uses, in John chapter 10, concerning a shepherd and his sheep, then, provided him with an avenue for teaching—using a familiar situation to explain a spiritual truth. A fairly common occurrence for Jesus.

To begin to understand the full significance of this passage of Scripture, it’s necessary to go back to the previous chapter of John’s gospel and just do a little recap on what was happening in the ministry of Jesus at that point. In chapter nine, you will recall, the writer gives us the account of the healing, by Jesus, of a man who had been born blind. This event subsequently came to the attention of the Pharisees, who questioned the man about his healing, being concerned, as they were, at its occurrence on the Sabbath. They wanted to know something of the circumstances of the healing and something of the man who had healed him. At the end of the account, however, the man’s explanation was not accepted by the Pharisees and he was unceremoniously thrown out, as it were.

It is helpful for us then, that the illustration or allegory of the Good Shepherd, which comes straight after this event, needs to be seen in the context of the healing of this blind man and the reaction of the Pharisees to the man who had been healed.

The first thing it tells us, looking at it in this context, is that there are those who want to scatter the flock. Not everyone who claims to be a Christian leader, has God’s blessing. Go figure.

Now, the sheep pen, in the time of Christ, was a rectangular enclosure surrounded by four walls constructed out of stone. It had no roof but offered some protection from the weather and various predators. The way into this pen was via one single opening. To enter the pen, one had to go through this doorway. For a large sheep pen, that was to contain many flocks, a gatekeeper was employed. It was his job to allow in, only the flocks of the shepherds whom he knew. Any person who attempted to gain access by any means, other than by the gate, was obviously up to no good and was regarded as a thief and a bandit. Such a person was only out for what he could gain for himself.

In the evening, when all the sheep were safely in the pen, the shepherd would then sleep in the doorway. As there was no gate that could be closed, the shepherd, himself, became the door and would sleep in the opening. The sheep could not get out unless they walked over the shepherd and no wolf could attack the sheep unless it first gained entry past the shepherd. That's how it all worked. Things are a bit different now, I'm sure.

Jesus, in his criticism of the Pharisees, likens them to thieves and bandits, whose motivation in leading the flock of God, seemed to be their own gain. By doing so, rather confrontationally, I might add, Jesus points out the disruptive and deceptive nature of their legalism and narrow-mindedness. Rather than protecting the flock of God, as true shepherds of God, their legalism only succeeded in scattering the flock. And this was highlighted in the previous chapter, as you will recall, when, in the same way, the Pharisees had cast out, from the temple, the man who had been born blind.

These pharisaical gatekeepers, it is inferred, do not let them enter into the sheep fold, for they do not have the authority of the true shepherd. The foundation of their authority was wrong. Jesus indicates that he alone has true authority for he has obtained the gatekeeper's invitation.

Even today there are those who would scatter the flock of God—the false shepherds who seek their own gain by causing dissent. They serve their own interests rather than the interests of the flock. They deceive the sheep into thinking that they themselves are the God's messenger or pretend that the way into the fold is by means other than by way of the door.

In explaining the parable to his disciples, Jesus is affirming that *he* is the door. And in referring to himself as the door, Jesus is not saying anything different to his being the shepherd, for, as I have explained, the shepherd becomes the door, by which the sheep are protected. In this way, Jesus indicates that it is only by way of himself that one may enter the kingdom of God. For even those who seek to shepherd God's flock, they too must also go by way of Jesus.

But, the door not only leads to protection, it also leads to salvation. This is a slight advance on the parable, because we now learn that Jesus does not only offer leadership, but life itself. And not just any sort of life—abundant life—life in its fullest measure.

And this goes on to highlight a further aspect—the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. The true shepherd knows his sheep and they know him.

The shepherd knows each one of the sheep individually, by name, and leads them safely, while they have complete trust in him because they recognise his voice. When the shepherd goes out each day, the sheep follow because they know his voice. The sheep know the shepherd and they recognise the call that he gives his own sheep. The case is different when a stranger attempts to lead the sheep. They will not follow a stranger, even if he were to dress in the true shepherd's clothes and imitate his call. The reason given is again the voice. The sheep do not know the voice of strangers and therefore, will run away.

Jesus, in using this imagery, shows the reason why the people were coming to him. Jesus knows those whom he has called and they follow because they recognise him to be the true shepherd of the sheep. The Pharisees, on the other hand, did not have the authentic voice of the true shepherd. For those who wish to lead God's people, this relationship must be formed first. For John, the author, discerning Jesus' voice and abiding in him, is a central feature of Christian discipleship.

But, Jesus also said that he had other sheep that did not belong to this fold. In other words, God's flock is not confined to the Jewish people. The Pharisees had for centuries exercised the exclusivity and self-centredness of Judaism. They had failed to go beyond their own boundaries. Jesus, on the other hand, showed that the Kingdom of God was much larger than Judaism.

But, Jesus is not just the model of a good shepherd. He goes on in verses 11-18, to bring in a new element to his teaching. And that is, that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. And here is where the image diverges from that of general sheep farming.

It is said that a shepherd, while tending his flock of sheep, was totally responsible for the wellbeing of the sheep. If he lost any sheep, he would have to recompense the owner. If he was faced with a wolf, he was expected to stay and protect the sheep in his care to the best of his ability. However, if he was faced with the attack of two wolves, together, he was, in fact, allowed to run away. Two attacking wolves were considered too much for one person to fend off. Consequently, in this situation, the shepherd was *not* held accountable for any losses. In the light of this, it's not likely that too many shepherds actually died, protecting their sheep. Jesus' reference to the hired hands also points this out, for the hired hands really only cared about themselves, lacking the commitment to the welfare of the sheep.

In declaring himself the Good Shepherd, then, Jesus redefines his role as the shepherd of God's flock. The Good Shepherd is not only prepared to face danger in defending his sheep, but actually pays the ultimate price of his own life on their account. Only in this way do the sheep get to experience life in its fullest. This is the essential difference between his illustration of the shepherd and Jesus' own shepherd ministry. The task of the regular shepherd was to stay alive, as best he could, so that he could protect his sheep. The ministry of Jesus, on the other hand, was to actually die for the sheep.

This is the characteristic thing and the reason that the shepherd illustration was chosen. It is the pivotal point of the illustration—and that's why I wanted to include verses 11-18 in our reading from John this morning. If a shepherd died in defence of his sheep, it was an accident. He planned to live for them, not die for them. For Jesus, however, death for the sheep was his sole purpose. It was for this reason that he came.

In this way, also, Jesus predicted that he was actually going to be killed by the very people that he classified as false shepherds. His death, however, is not an involuntary one, but one in which he voluntarily lays down his life for his sheep. But it does not end there, for Jesus not only says that he is able to lay down his life, but is able, also, to take it up again. That which he does in his resurrection.

Jesus' illustration of the shepherds and his sheep and the problems that are faced with thieves, bandits, and hired hands who are not committed to the protection of the sheep, points out the essential nature of Jesus' ministry as the Good Shepherd. It is he who leads and protects his sheep and lays down his life for them. There are many who seek entrance into the fold, the Kingdom of God, by other means than by the legitimate door, Jesus Christ. These, in the end, will be shown up as thieves and bandits. However, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is known by the gatekeeper and is able to lead his flock into the protection of the fold.

For those who would follow the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, there is the confidence that he knows us, leads us, protects us and that he laid down his life for us. As we seek to follow his voice, we will find that we have life in its fullest measure.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.