

The Good Shepherd – Easter 4 2009 3rd May Robert Innes

Of all the images used to picture Jesus, the metaphor of the good shepherd is the most well known and best loved. In the first few centuries of the church's life, when Christians painted pictures of Jesus, the image they painted most frequently was of Christ as a shepherd. Whether you live in the Middle East, where Bedouin shepherds still roam the countryside, or if you come from somewhere like Wales – where there are many more sheep than there are people – even in Belgium, where sheep are a very small part of the agricultural economy – the image of the good shepherd, leading, guiding and caring for the sheep still speaks powerfully to us today.

I wonder if you have ever noticed just how many of the great Old Testament leaders started out as shepherds? Abraham kept flocks of sheep in the ancient city of Ur. Moses was responsible for his father-in-law Jethro's sheep. David was a shepherd boy before he was selected to be king of Israel. It makes you think, how different the world might be today if our political leaders started out with experience down on the farm rather than in law school!

Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets looked forward to a leader who would be the good and true shepherd of their people. "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd, and he shall gently lead those that are with young", writes Isaiah. So when Jesus says: "I am the good shepherd" he addresses 1000 years of hope and expectation. And those listening to him must have been thrilled that this might, at last, be the shepherd king who would lead his people in the ways of justice and peace.

The gospel reading for today is well known to us. I'm going to pick out from it three verses that we can reflect on together. If you are following in your Bible they are John 11 verses 14, 15 and 16. We begin with verse 14: "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."

It is an image of intimacy, between the Father and Jesus, and between Jesus and his sheep. Behind it, lies the wonderful scene depicted in Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul." All of us from time to time need that sense of spiritual refreshment. We need to feel that we matter to God, and that there is someone watching out for us and taking care of us.

Actually, even in modern secular Europe, I think that most people still do have that sense that somewhere out there is a god who is on our side. Most people, when the bad times come, cry out in prayer to god whom they believe is out there someplace. But fewer people today have a sense of intimacy and closeness with God. Sadly, not so many people experience the presence of God either in their own personal spiritual lives or in the institution of the church. God is still a cultural memory but rather less a living reality.

When Jesus says "I am the good shepherd" he speaks as a present, personal friend. He is the personal God, the shepherd who knows each of his sheep by name. He offers the same intimacy with each of us, as he knows with his father.

I went cycling on Friday around the Flemish town of Dendermonde, and along the banks of the Shelde there was a flock of sheep and lambs enjoying the spring sunshine, munching their way through the thick grass. They were a picture of contentment. Of course, we are not sheep; we are human adults with all the responsibilities that entails. And we can't enjoy that sense of ignorant bliss that belongs to the sheep in the fields. But I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels that modern life has become more stressed than it should be. And perhaps if we could know and experience more deeply the shepherd's care than for us - well even if our anxieties and stresses won't disappear - they could at least be given a better sense of proportion. It has certainly been my experience, that if we are in relationship with God, the good things in life take on extra meaning and lustre, whilst the bad things become easier to bear.

I love to hear the stories and testimonies of those for whom the sense of the shepherdly care of God is strong. I was talking this week to a Rwandan lady. She is someone that few of us here will know, but she gave me permission to tell her story. In 1994 she was attacked in her home by men wielding machetes. She lost her home and nearly all her possessions. She was lucky to escape with her life. She fled and eventually, several years later, found her way to Belgium. She now lives in Brussels. In many respects things are still very difficult for her. I asked her what was the secret of her spiritual life. She told me that there are two things. Firstly, she said, I give thanks to God. I thank him for my life. I thank him that he has made me in his image. I thank him that he cares for me. And then secondly, I ask him to give me peace. If you have peace, inner peace, you can cope with anything else. She is someone who could say from her own experience: "yes, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me."

Secondly, verse 15 "I lay down my life for the sheep". Not all shepherds are good. What makes Jesus the good shepherd is that he gives his life to save his sheep. When the wild animals come and threaten the sheep, the good shepherd stands between the source of danger and the flock. By contrast, the bad shepherd puts his own welfare ahead of that of the sheep. The bad shepherd cares mainly for himself.

Jesus is speaking here of his death on the cross, and this is St. John's way of expressing one of the core affirmations of the Christian faith: "Christ died for our sins." St. John doesn't give us the sophisticated doctrine of the atonement we find in St. Paul. Instead John puts it very simply. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The shepherd takes upon himself the fate that would otherwise befall the sheep. He faces suffering and death on their behalf and in their place.

The principle is of wider application. Bad shepherds are those who put their own interests ahead of those for whom they are responsible. Good shepherds sacrifice their own prospects if the wellbeing of the sheep is threatened. This applies in the church; it applies in family life; it applies in business life. Recently, we've seen some notorious example of bad shepherds, of senior business leaders who when trouble has come have been only too willing to flee with large pensions rather than to face up to and accept responsibility. And for all of us in any position of responsibility the true test of our character is when we are faced with a choice. When a predator comes to the door, be it a wolf, or a lion, or a bear, how do we respond? Do we look to our own prospects and position, or do we care first of all for the welfare of those for whom we are responsible? "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep".

Thirdly, verse 16: “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also.” Jesus is not content with rescuing the current group of sheep from the danger they face. He going to enlarge the group very considerably by bringing in a whole lot of very different sheep.

The original sheep are the people of Israel. But as the prophets had always hinted, God’s purposes do not come to an end with the nation of Israel itself. In the immediate context, Jesus is probably referring to the Samaritans. These were a people, ethnically similar to the Jews but worshipping God at Mount Gerizim not in Jerusalem. Rivalries between the Jews and the Samaritans went back many centuries, and a good Jew would take great pains to avoid travelling through Samaria and coming into contact with them. For a righteous Jew, the idea of sharing the same sheepfold with a Samaritan was an alarming prospect.

Beyond the Samaritans are the Gentiles, people like us. Very soon after the resurrection the gospel was preached beyond the borders of Israel to the Greeks and the Gentiles on the fringes of the synagogues of the Jewish diaspora. They too, would be welcomed into the care of the Good Shepherd. They too would have a place in the one fold. And conventional Israelite religion was hugely disrupted to accommodate them.

And Jesus words remain intriguing and irritating even today. If Jesus is our good shepherd, yet he is not a shepherd we can keep to ourselves. He is always prompting us to think about the sheep who are in other sheepfolds. We can never rest in the comfortable position of enjoying only the company of sheep who are like us. That is a challenge in a diverse church like Holy Trinity with its different congregations, where it is always so much easier to enjoy the company of people of our own age, our own ethnic background, our own tradition, then it is to reach out in fellowship across the communication barriers to those who from different backgrounds from ourselves.

The message of Jesus can never be confined to just one people or culture. Over this last month, we have been focussing on the work of our mission partners, mission east. They work in eastern europe, in Afghanistan, Nepal...amongst people with cultures often very different from our own culture. And we will be hearing a little about their work a bit later on in our service. The promises to Israel are made for sharing. The good news of Jesus is something we simply cannot keep to ourselves. Which is why Christianity is inherently a missionary religion. : “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also.”

To conclude: Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd.” He comes to lead his people to green pasture, to guide and protect us, to hold us in all the trials of life, even through the valley of the shadow of death itself. We know him to be the *good* shepherd because he has laid down his life for his sheep. And he is the shepherd whose concern extends not merely to the sheep who belong to the home fold, but to those of other communities, cultures and traditions. He is an exclusive shepherd with an inclusive care for the sheep.

And so when Jesus declares himself to be the good shepherd, he surely exceeds what the Old Testament prophets could have hoped for. They looked for a new government, a just and wise shepherd-king for the people of Israel. But Jesus reveals himself as the good shepherd in a much deeper and broader way. A shepherd who is deeply and lovingly concerned for each of us his people. A shepherd who sacrifices himself for his people. Who knows each of us by name, who feeds us in the rich pastures that make for eternal life. A shepherd whose unbounded concern is not limited to the house of Israel but who seeks out his sheep in every land and culture. It is to the care of that great good shepherd that we commend ourselves and those whom we love today.