

# The Good Shepherd ..

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*A sermon given on Fourth Sunday of Easter 25<sup>th</sup> April 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Online Attended Communion Service*

*John 10:11-18*

Well, the world of sheep and shepherds is probably not part of daily experience for most of us, and yet Jesus's statement, "*I am the Good Shepherd*" still resonates. It's partly because the Bible is so full of shepherding language: Abel, the world's first victim of violence was a shepherd; psalm 23 tells us that the Lord is our shepherd; Ezekiel speaks of the kings of Israel as shepherds; Isaiah says, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray"; Jesus himself speaks of going to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and of dividing the sheep from the goats; he famously tells a parable about a shepherd going in search of a lost sheep. So when he says, "I am the Good Shepherd", he's tapping into all that rich biblical imagery. And in this passage, the implications of being the Good Shepherd are explored. In particular, the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

When you look at the passage carefully, you can see that this idea keeps on being repeated: verse 11, the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep; verse 15, I lay down my life for the sheep; verse 17, for this reason, the Father loves me because I lay down my life in order to take it up again; verse 18, I lay it down of my own accord; and again in verse 18, I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it up again. So if anybody asks what is this relatively short passage saying, the answer is pretty clear. It's saying Jesus is the Good Shepherd and what makes him good is that he lays down his life for the sheep.

But why should a shepherd need to lay down his life? The answer, surely, is that the sheep are in danger - and that's worth pondering for a moment. I wonder, have you ever asked yourself why we speak of Jesus as our saviour? It's not just a nice religious title; it's because according to the Scriptures, we need saving and we're helpless to do it by ourselves. When one of my daughters was about two years old, she confidently announced that we need Jesus inside us to stop us from rattling: as a theological statement, it may not be as wide of the mark as first it sounds. We need fixing inside, and until we're fixed, we're in danger.

The power of sin holds us captive and distorts all our relationships: sin puts us at odds with God and makes us ignore him; sin puts us at odds with the natural world and makes us greedy to consume it; sin puts us at odds with each other and makes us fearful and afraid of each other so that we find all sorts of reasons not to be open, not to be trusting and accepting, not to be loving and forgiving; sin even puts us at odds with ourselves so that we become restless and dissatisfied, frustrated and disappointed in ourselves, guilty and full of self-loathing. Our souls are in danger and we need a saviour who will rescue us and bring us peace. Jesus says "I am the Good Shepherd and I lay down my life for the sheep." And the fact that he needs to do that for us shows us how big a fix we're really in. And this shepherd who lays down his life also offers intimacy: he knows and is known; he knows his own and his own know him just as the father knows him and he knows the father; the sheep recognise his voice; the Good Shepherd obeys the command from his father.

So the Good Shepherd offers intimacy, a sense of belonging, the security of being 'fully known', so we don't have to have any pretences. All of which is good news. 'Come to the Good Shepherd', Jesus seems to be saying, 'and you will find rest for your soul; come to the Good Shepherd and you will be led beside still waters; you will find forgiveness and healing; you will find acceptance and love; you will find comfort in darkness and guidance along the rocky way - because the Good Shepherd has laid down his life for you and for me and has taken it up again. And he knows you and he will never forget you.

All of which is wonderful gospel stuff, we can never get tired of hearing it enough. But there is something else. Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold".

The struggle in the early church that dominates the pages of the New Testament is the struggle to work out the relationship between Jew and Non-Jew, the Gentiles, the pagan world, the Greek world. When you became a follower of Jesus in the first century, did you have to become a Jew? Did you have to get circumcised and keep the food laws and observe the Sabbath and follow the law of Moses? Was it possible to become a follower of Jesus without also becoming a follower of Moses? It was a hot issue because racism was a problem in the early church: Jews felt themselves to be very distinct from other peoples; they tended to look down on the Gentiles; they thought the gentiles were unclean, immoral idolaters. And of course, when Jews and

Gentiles became Christians, some of those attitudes got carried into the church. The assumption of the first 12 apostles was that if a gentile wanted to follow Jesus, they had to become Jews first. If you want to fit in, you have to become like us - and the great contribution of the Apostle Paul was to overturn that and to insist that the gospel was for all races and for all people. And you could become a follower of Jesus exactly where you were without leaving your culture behind.

And of course, all of this is still so relevant today. Folk who have successfully joined our church in recent years have tended to be folk who are very like those who are already here: already Christians, so they know what to expect in worship; they're not put off by coming into a great Gothic building like this; they tend to be of a similar age; tend to be retired; tend to be of a similar class; tend to have the confidence to engage with what's going on so that they can take part in it and access it. But for anybody else, anyone who doesn't have that background, it's much harder. And we see a steady flow of people who join us for the odd service here and there, but who don't stick because they find it hard to connect and feel that this isn't really a community for them.

And all of this happens without anybody doing anything deliberately wrong, without anybody intending to. But unintentionally, we find ourselves ending up as a rather narrow little clique of the like-minded: we fail to reflect the diversity of the wider community and of all God's children. And I mention all of this because this week the General Synod has received another report about racism in the Church of England: the report is called 'From Lament to Action', and it joins the other 20 reports about racism in the church that have been produced over the last 35 or so years. The problem was acknowledged a long time ago, but not enough has changed. It's not that white Anglicans are inherently prejudiced or hateful, it's just that we unwittingly make it difficult for anyone different to join us. And you don't have to be black or from an ethnic minority in order to experience that, just be of a different social class and it can be hard to fit in.

But Jesus says *"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice so there will be one flock and one shepherd."*

But if there is to be finally only one flock, what's going to happen to all the separate little sheep folds with their own walls and boundaries and gateways? Surely they will eventually all be levelled to allow there to be one flock only.

So if we are to come to Jesus, the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for us all, we shall have to become a little bit more like him in being willing to lay down our own lives in some measure, to let go of our loyalty to our own particular sheepfold, with our own particular customs and traditions. We can't avoid those: every church community has its own culture, but we have to avoid making these 'absolutes'; we have to avoid making these too strong; we have to focus on the shepherd and not on the sheepfold.

And I finish with a little story which I heard from a colleague in another church who was teaching a group of children in a 'godly play' session about the twenty third psalm - 'godly play', if you're not familiar with it, is a way of telling Bible stories, using little models and inviting a discussion with children about how they might see themselves fitting into the story. And my friend was telling them about the twenty third psalm, the Lord is my shepherd. And he had these little models of sheep, a flock of sheep that were all different colours, and he asked them, "Why do you think the sheep are all different colours?" And a little girl put up her hand and said, "Because they're all different, but they're all equal." And my friend said, "How do you know that they're all equal?" And there was a silence as they pondered it - and then a little hand went up and a voice said, "Because they're all following the same shepherd"

## Reading Texts

John 10:11-18

<sup>11</sup> "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup> The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. <sup>14</sup> I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. <sup>17</sup> For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. <sup>18</sup> No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."