

John 10:11-18 – The Good Shepherd

Background

In the passage that was read to us this morning, Jesus wonderfully describes himself as the Good Shepherd. I want to set his words in their context so that we can understand just what he is saying about himself and also what he is saying about those who belong to him, his sheep, as he calls them – us.

In the previous chapter of John's Gospel we read that Jesus healed a man who had been blind from birth. His friends and neighbours could not understand what had happened to him so they took him along to the Jewish leaders to see what they would make of it. They decided that the man who had restored his sight must be a sinner because he had worked on the Sabbath day and, in their view broken one of God's commandments. The man who had been given sight argued with them saying that the man who had healed him must be from God, how else could he give sight to the blind. So the Jewish leaders threw him out and told him not to return. They threw him out but Jesus then sought him out.

It is against this background that Jesus speaks of himself using a picture of a shepherd with his flock. This picture is famously used in the Old Testament of God's care for his people. Psalm 23:

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake...

And it is a picture of the care which the leaders of God's people *should* have for those whom they lead, reflecting and modeling God's care for his people.

But all too often the leaders of God's people failed to live up to their calling. The prophet Ezekiel describes the leaders of his day as faithless shepherds who have failed to care for the sheep. They are concerned only to feed themselves from the flock and have left them to wander over the mountains. God says that he will judge these faithless shepherds and that he will come himself to search for his lost sheep and care for them (Ezekiel 34). This promise of God's coming to care for his sheep is echoed in a very well-known passage from the prophet Micah. He says,

'But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel...
He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they will live securely... (Micah 5:2,4)

Here is the paradox. In the face of faithless leaders who scatter the flock rather than gathering them, God himself will come to shepherd his flock and seek out the lost (Ezekiel 34). Yet the one who is coming as shepherd of God's people will be born in Bethlehem. How can both these things be true?

It is true because Jesus, born at Bethlehem in Judaea, is Emmanuel, God with us. He *is* God come to seek out the lost and to shepherd his people. He has come to show us the wonderful love that God has for us.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd

Against the context of the Jewish leaders who have failed to care for the man born blind – they have driven him away – Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd who has come to seek out the

sheep who are lost and wandering without a shepherd. He is the Good Shepherd who cares for the sheep. Let's see how Jesus describes this care for his people.

He knows his sheep by name (v. 14 cf. v. 3). They are not just a flock of woolly creatures to him; they are individuals – he knows them each one. Jesus knows us each one. He knows our strengths and weaknesses. He knows how easily we are led astray. He knows our individual needs. He knows our hopes and fears. He knows us, he loves us and he cares for us.

Jesus says that he lays down his life for the sheep. Imagine a shepherd looking after sheep on a mountainside. If a mountain lion came after the sheep what will he do? If he does not really care for the sheep – perhaps he is just a hired hand – he will seek to protect himself and will flee. But a good shepherd, one who cares for the sheep, will fight off the threat even at the cost of his own life; he will be willing to lay down his life for the sheep.

Jesus love for us is like that. In verse 11 he says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And just in case we missed what he is saying, he says it again in verses 14-15, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me ... and I lay down my life for the sheep."

Jesus' death was not some great tragedy of human history much less was it an accident. Jesus speaks in these verses of the way he will deliberately and willingly lay down his life for the sheep, "No one takes it from me," says Jesus, "but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." (Verse 18). This is why Jesus came into the world. This was the great work the Father gave him to do. He came to lay down his life as a ransom for sinners.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6)

His death pays the price for our sin and delivers us from our great enemies, from sin, death and judgment. What a wonderful Saviour! What a wonderful salvation.

But I want you to notice that Jesus not only says that he lays down his life for the sheep, but also that he has the power to take it up again. And this is of key importance. It's all very well for a shepherd to lay down his life for the sheep, but what then is the use of a dead shepherd? Jesus not only died for us, he also rose from the dead for us. He is risen, and he lives for ever as "the great Shepherd of the sheep" (Hebrews 13:20). He continues his loving care for his us, ensuring that not one of his sheep is lost. He who saved us by his death upon the cross ever lives for us ensuring that we are brought safe to glory.

Here is the ground of our assurance as Christians; we have a faithful Saviour who is a Great and Good Shepherd of his sheep. Our assurance is not in ourselves, for we know that we are prone to wander, but in the Lord Jesus who has redeemed us through his shed blood and will not let anyone snatch us from his hands.

The characteristics of his sheep?

We have looked at the characteristics of the good Shepherd, I want us now to look at the characteristics of his sheep.

Have you ever seen sheep that graze on the open mountainsides? There may be several flocks of sheep belonging to different farmers. How can you tell which sheep belong to which farmer? The sheep are generally marked in different ways with different marks in different coloured paints. You can tell who the sheep belong to by these visible characteristics.

What are the characteristics that should mark those who belong to Christ?

Jesus says that his sheep know him, he says, "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" (verses 14-15). These are remarkable words. We can understand what Jesus means when he says he knows his sheep – he knows us. It's wonderful to think that Jesus knows all about us, our needs and circumstances, and

that he loves and cares for us accordingly. But what does it mean that his sheep know him? Even more extraordinary is that Jesus says this is like the way in which the Father knows him and he knows the Father. What does it mean for us to know Christ as our shepherd in this way?

It means more than hiding ourselves among his flock – coming along to church. It means more than knowing the message of the Gospel and that Christ died for sinners. It means knowing him as our own Saviour through faith in him; knowing that "he loved *me* and gave himself for *me*." It means loving him in return and knowing that we are safe in his care for now and for all eternity.

Secondly, his sheep hear his voice and follow him – they listen to his voice (verse 16). At Christ Church we have a logo that declares, "Learning to live the life." That is one of the key marks of those who belong to Christ; we seek to listen to him, learn from him and follow him. This should shape every aspect of our daily lives; our home life, our work life, the way we relate to our neighbours and friends, the things we say and the things we do. We are learning from Christ together and seeking to become more like him through listening to his word and through the transforming power of his Spirit.

Thirdly, we seek to live in fellowship with one another. Jesus says that "there will be one flock and one shepherd" (verse 16). We are not just individual sheep, each going our own way. We are a flock; we seek to follow Christ together, to love one another and to encourage one another in learning of Christ and growing like him.

Lastly, those who belong to the Lord Jesus are eager for others to join us in following Christ. Jesus says, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (verse 16). In context, Jesus is telling his small band of Jewish followers that his purpose is to add a great number more to his flock – people from every nation, language group and ethnic background. Look at how that "little flock" has grown. But it has grown as those who know Christ share the good news with others – the good news that in Jesus they also can find forgiveness for sin, joy in place of guilt and freedom from all that has damaged their lives through the transforming power of the risen Saviour. The flock grows as we invite others to "taste and see that the Lord is good."

How distinctly do these characteristics mark our lives?

May our wonderful Saviour help us to know him, listen to him, learn of him and follow him more closely together. And may he use us in his great work of drawing others into his kingdom.

Peter Misselbrook: Christchurch Downend 22/4/2018