

I Am The Good Shepherd

This morning we are continuing our sermon series on the “I am” statements of Jesus looking at I am the Good Shepherd. The reverend Johnny reminded us last week that in earlier disputes with the Pharisees Jesus claimed “before Abraham was born I am” This was not a grammatical error. Jesus didn't say “I was”- a startling statement in itself, but “I am” the covenantal name God give Moses out of the burning bush some 1500 years previously. Exodus 3 v 14 “say to the Israelites ” I am” has sent me to you. Verse 15 “say to the Israelites, the LORD the God of your fathers has sent me to you. For clarification, the Hebrew for LORD is Yahweh (which in the 12th century became Jehovah). Yahweh sounds like and may be derived from the Hebrew word for “I am.” In using this name Jesus was expressing his oneness with the father and the eternity of his being. Jesus is Lord.

There is continuity between names given to God in the Old Testament and the words of Jesus and his miracles in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, Jehovah Jireh - the Lord who sees and provides, Jesus, feeding the 5000 and the 4000. Jehovah Rophi- the Lord my healer, Jehovah Rapha- the Lord who heals, and Jesus' earthly healing ministry. Jehovah Rohee - Lord is my shepherd and Jesus “I am the Good Shepherd.” Jesus' words reveal who he is, his character and the purpose of his calling. So it's surprising to learn that the religious elite keep confronting him. Later on, v24 at the Feast of Dedication, they asked, “how long will you keep us in suspense. If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me.” Sadly, as the reverend Johnny said last week “in many cases people, haven't really thought, or frankly care, who Jesus is.

Now to Jesus the Good Shepherd. Like the Reverend Johnny and Stephen, I am not a son of the soil, having grown up in Belfast. But in the past 20 years I have been blessed to live in the countryside in a home surrounded by fields. Lockdown has given me an opportunity to observe the sheep in those fields. They are quite individual with unique markings and distinct features. Some have very pleasant faces whilst others look quite grumpy. Their calls are unique too. That's how the ewes keep tabs on their lambs and vice versa. Animal psychologists tell us they are creatures of habit and of limited intelligence. They will follow paths into desolate places even though excellent forage is close by. There are reports of them walking into open fires. Shepherds say they are stubborn, timid, and utterly defenceless in equal measure. For instance, if a sheep rolls over on its back with its legs in the air, it cannot right itself and will die within a few hours unless set back on its feet. It's not surprising that the Bible symbolises humans as sheep. Psalm 100 v 3, “know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us and we are his. We are his people the sheep of his pasture.” Isaiah 53v6, “we all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way. Matthew 9v36, “ when he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Sheep need a good shepherd to survive, and we all need the Good Shepherd Jesus to survive, to have life, to have salvation. Whilst I would guess the fundamental nature of sheep hasn't changed over the millennia, I have no doubt that shepherding in the West in the 21st century is far from that described by Jesus 2000 years ago. If we look at Jesus' words through our 21st century lens, we can lose something of the imagery, symbolism, and significance of his words at that time. A study Bible and commentaries can help us overcome that cultural bias. In biblical times, shepherding was a much more intimate occupation than today.

Most sheep were raised for milk, wool, and breeding. A few sheep went for food and religious sacrifices. Sheep were kept for years. A shepherd would get to know his sheep and was able to call each of them by name. The sheep also got to know the sound of the shepherd's voice and would follow him wherever he led them. Given the arid nature of the land and the number of natural predators, the shepherd had to lead the sheep to new pasture each day and safety each night. The very existence of the sheep depended on the 24 hour dedication of the shepherd. Last week we read the shepherd goes on ahead of them and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. In 2018 Sophie and I were travelling in the Holy Land and as we were heading down to Galilee on the tour bus we saw a shepherd leading his sheep line astern. Our tour guide told us it was quite a common sight. But he noted that on another trip the bus had been held up in a village by a man driving sheep. The passengers commented on this so the guide got off the bus to inquire. The mystery was solved when he returned. He was not the shepherd of the sheep but the town butcher. There is a metaphor there somewhere! Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he loves us and knows us intimately. He knows us in the same way as he knows the Father and the Father knows him. He knows every pain we endure - whether it's physical emotional or spiritual - every tear we shed, every hurt we face, and he knows when we're too weary to go another step. Jesus' knowledge of us penetrates the deepest and darkest parts of our psyche. Psalm 139 v 15, "when I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body." He doesn't turn a blind eye to our needs or a deaf ear to our cries for help. When we cry out to him, he knows how to rescue us and bring us to a place of healing.

Our Good Shepherd doesn't just point us to grassy pastures and pools of water and say there's what you need go and get it. He leads us there and abides with us until we heal. All we need to do is listen and be led. If we take time to listen for his voice, through his Word and the promptings of the Holy Spirit, he will lead us to where we need to be. Our circumstances may not change markedly but we will be restored to God's love and God's Shalom – God's peace, where there is nothing missing, nothing broken, and everything restored. King David tells of such experiences in Psalm 3. Verse 1, " Oh Lord how many are my foes. How many rise up against me." Verse 4, " to the Lord I cried aloud and he answers me from his holy hill." Verse 5, " I lie down and sleep. I wake again because the Lord sustains me." Verse 6, "I will not fear the 10s of thousands drawn up against me on every side." Now the good shepherd will lead us to safety and life whereas the false shepherds of this world, like the town butcher driving the sheep to slaughter, will try to drive us, and bend us to their will which ultimately leads to spiritual death.

Jesus found them in the religious and political hierarchy of his day and he castigated them. It is no different today, false shepherds, false teachers, false prophets are found in every facet of our society, from politicians, success gurus to entertainers and the rest. Be warned. False shepherds do not love you, do not know you and are more concerned with their own self-interest. They are not defenders of the Christian faith. At best they will tolerate your faith. But through time they will undermine and belittle your faith and ultimately they will try to eradicate it. What a contrast to our Good Shepherd.

He is characterised by love, love, love, love, and love. Five times in the passage we are told of the sacrificial love of the Good Shepherd in verses 11, 15, 17, and twice in verse 18 Jesus tells us the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Verse 18, "I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my father. These words foretell the crucifixion and resurrection. More next week.

In the Old Testament the sheep died for the shepherd by way of the old sacrificial system. In the New Testament, the New Covenant, the Good Shepherd has died for his sheep. Note Jesus didn't die as a martyr killed by men. He died as a substitute, willingly laying down his life for our sins. John 18v56 at his arrest, "who is it you want. Jesus of Nazareth they replied. I am he. When Jesus said "I am he" they drew back and fell to the ground. Paul calls this the majesty of his power in 2 Thessalonians. Jesus died willingly. Matthew 26v53 at his arrest, "do not think I cannot call on my father and he will at once put at my disposal more than 12 legions of angels (72,000 angels) but how then would the scriptures be fulfilled." The Good Shepherd has purchased the sheep. They are bought by his blood. They are his because he died for them. They belong to him and he cares for them. The blood of Christ is sufficient for the salvation of the world but it's only efficient for those who believe. If you have never entered this relationship, accepted his gracious provision, taken his heart of love. I beg you to submit yourselves to the shepherd as Lord of your soul today. Then as it says in 1 Peter 5 v 4, "when the Chief Shepherd appears you (his sheep) will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away." Although this is a future event remember when you become one of the Lord's sheep you enjoy the benefits of being in his flock. As the song goes, "right here, right now." John 10v10, "I have come that they may have life and life to the full." Jesus didn't come just to tend to the healthy strong sheep he came to tend those who are sick, broken, diseased and weak. Jesus is our Good Shepherd the Greek word for good is kalos which also means beautiful, virtuous, excellent, genuine (not false or counterfeit).

As we finish let's remind ourselves of the security and peace we have in our beautiful shepherd as we look at Psalm 23 and the comments of an unknown author. The Lord is my shepherd; that's relationship. I shall not want; that's provision. He makes me lie down in green pastures; that's rest and peace. He leadeth me beside still waters; that's refreshment. He restoreth my soul; that's healing. He leadeth me in the path of righteousness; that's guidance, for his namesake; that's purpose. Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death; that's testing – grief, illness, every conceivable problem. I will fear no evil; that's protection. For Thou art with me; that's faithfulness. Thy rod and staff comfort me; that's discipline. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; that's hope. Thou anointest my head with oil; that's consecration. My cup runneth over; that's super abundance. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; that's blessing and I will dwell in the House of the Lord; that's security, forever; that's eternity. Amen