

I know I've referred to this before, but about 13 years ago I was on a retreat in Ambleside in the Lake District. The house we were staying in was about a mile away from Ambleside village so in the afternoons we would walk into town. The fields were full of sheep. One early morning I could hear the sheep bleating and I wondered what all the fuss was about. I looked outside and they were all running in the same direction. The reason soon became clear – the farmer was out in the fields in his quadbike, checking they were safe through the night, and bringing food for them. Later in the day I was out walking and called to the sheep, but all they did was stare back and keep grazing.

You see the big difference between the farmer and myself was that the sheep knew him and knew that he was there to help.

Our home home for many years was in Garvagh just outside Coleraine, and we lived in the middle of the countryside. Very often we would have sheep either in our garden or caught in hedges in the fields surrounding our garden. They are very dependent, they can get very dirty, and they're not very clever. And it's probably for these good reasons that the Bible regularly refers to us as sheep, in need of a shepherd.

A bit like the sheep throughout life we can get ourselves stuck. We can get ourselves into situations that seem really hard to escape from. And yet if only we would realise that God is there as the Shepherd to bring us through. The amazing thing about our Great Shepherd is that he loves us and is always routing for us no matter what situation we find ourselves in. You can be lost a bit in life and he still loves you and longs for you.

So here's some thoughts on our reading today :

**1. we must be careful to follow the Shepherd.**

The reality is folks, that a bit like sheep, we very rarely learn from our mistakes. I've seen sheep that having been freed from a hedgerow then go on to get stuck again. They are easily distracted and easily led astray. So are we. An American writer wrote about this distraction in a commentary on his observation of sheep. The sheep were all packed tightly into a lorry going to the slaughterhouse. Instead of anxiety or fear, the sheep are poking their heads out the slots, inquisitive, they are sniffing at their new surroundings, not realizing their fate. And the writer says this, "While we might laugh at the silliness of sheep, they are such a vivid illustration of our human state. On a daily basis, we are offered joyrides that promise pleasure and adventure, opportunities that seem to realize our ambition for recognition, power, material wealth, intimacy, and even meaning. At every turn, we are led by advertisers to believe that their products or services can fulfill our thirst for excitement and thrill. Unknowingly, we accept invitations for rides which take us on roads that could result in our slow spiritual deaths. Sadly, we are not often aware of the looming danger, as we are too preoccupied taking in the new experience and novelty. By the time we arrive at the slaughterhouse, it would be too late for us to escape our end." Folks, each of us needs to be careful to keep our eyes on Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Don't become distracted by other things. Unfortunately after COVID I've seen so many people lack discipline to even

be back at church each week. The danger is that they are now following a different pattern and the longer they give into it, the harder it will ever be to turn back to the Shepherd.

The second observation we can make is the **nature of the enemies around sheep**. When we were in Ambleside the farmer would be out early checking in case a fox had taken one of the new born lambs or that thieves had taken some away. The enemies of the sheep are dangerous and devious. Jesus said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10).

Today there are plenty of people who may come across as authentic and believable. And so we have to always be watchful and stay close to Jesus for protection.

It was Gandhi who said something like, “I love your Jesus, but it’s his followers I am not so fond of.” Perhaps that is because there are some who are not so much followers of Jesus as they might appear. It is not those who are good at spiritual talk, but those who actually follow Jesus and do what he said who are his sheep. I think a good test of whether someone or some thing is an enemy of the sheep is whether they bring you closer to the Shepherd or take you further away.

Finally, let’s look at the nature of the Shepherd. I am impressed by the love of the Shepherd for his sheep in this parable. He calls them each by name. He knows each one intimately and cares for them. He goes and searches for the wandering ones. Even those we think of as hopeless are still sheep, even though they may have strayed or messed up in life. Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). Folks, let’s not write off people just because they don’t conform to what we think they need to be to come to Church. God loves them unconditionally and will continue to seek them no matter whether they realise it or not.

Jesus also said that is the gate for the sheep. At first this sounds a bit confusing, until you understand that in biblical times the shepherd would take the sheep to a cave, or lead them into a sheep-pen. Both the cave and the pen had an opening where the sheep could go in and out. The only problem was that predators could go in as well. So the shepherd would lay down in front of the opening at night and literally become the gate. Nothing could go in or out without going through him. It could be a dangerous position to be in. He would literally lay down his life for the sheep, and many shepherds lost their lives in this way from an attack of predators. Remember to trust in Jesus the Good Shepherd and stay close to him rather than put your trust in other things. Whether life is good or testing, know that you will always be safe when Jesus is near.

A life with the Good Shepherd is a relationship. It means loving our Shepherd. Following him. Listening to his voice. Staying near him. Trusting him. It is about being familiar with his voice in your everyday life. It is about knowing that whatever happens in life, the Good Shepherd, God, is longing for you to trust in him and follow him in every aspect of your life.

Amen