

John 10:11 to 18 – Evensong

This evening I'm preaching on John 10 verses 11 to 18 and in verse 11 Jesus refers to himself as the good shepherd, and in verse 7 just before our reading Jesus refers to himself as the 'gate to the sheepfold'. Jesus used countryside metaphors which the population of agriculture workers who dominated Galilee at that time, would fully appreciate.

But verse 11 starts with the phrase, 'I am'. If you remember when God said to Moses go to the Israelites in Egypt and rescue my people, Moses replied who do I say sent me, and God replied, tell the Jews, "'I am' has sent me to you."

This phrase of 'I am', used by Jesus, wasn't lost on the Jews of course, the inference was only too plain to see, and many Jews were enraged at Jesus, saying that he was demonised.

Now Jesus uses the phrase 'I am' many times for example, in our reading where he says I am the good shepherd, and in John chapter 6 verse 51, I am the living bread, and in 8, verse 12, I am the light of the world, to name just two more instances.

Going back to the good shepherd, this phrase conjures up for me a kind man who loves his sheep, often building shelters for the pregnant ewes, and quite often out in the fields assisting ewes to give birth to their lambs and protecting his sheep and lambs from attack at night, his whole life would revolve around looking after his sheep.

They are like the nurses who dedicate their lives to the care of other people as amply demonstrated over the last twelve months during this pandemic.

The second half of verse 11 says as much, where John has written, "A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Now a good shepherd may well risk his life for his sheep, but Jesus didn't say risk his life, he said, "Lay down his life", and there is a world of difference between the two.

A good shepherd may well risk his life, but he never expects to die. Soldiers are the same, in war they are continually risking their lives, but young men will never believe it will be them who are going to die. But if you lay down your life for somebody, then you are expecting to die.

However, Jesus, as we know, will do exactly that in obedience to the Father, in verse 11 of our reading Jesus intimated as much when he said, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep; we need to notice here that he didn't say my sheep, but he said the sheep, Jesus lays his life down for everyone.

Jesus came into the world to die on the cross, and it is the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Lamb of God, that saves us from death, his victory over death ensures our victory over death, for those who believe and trust in him.

Of course, as there are good shepherds there are also bad shepherds, and these are more interested in their weekly pay packet than they are in the welfare of the sheep.

And when problems arise, they are never there when they are needed. Such people are unreliable because they only pay lip service to the task, and as Jesus says, allows the sheep to be snatched by wolves.

There is a lesson here for us as a Christian; Christ wants more than lip service from us he wants our bodies, hearts, and minds. The reason is simple; Christ calls us in many ways both great and small to proclaim in word or deed the Good News of salvation, but if we run away from that task, we are putting other people's future lives at risk, as Christians we are to pass on the good news to those who haven't heard it or who haven't understood it.

But Jesus in verse 14 reiterates that he is the good shepherd, and he adds, I know my own and my own know me.

In ancient Israel, a sheepfold wouldn't necessarily be for the shepherd's own sheep, it may be a secure place where anyone who has sheep may put them in for safety, so there could easily be several flocks of sheep all mixed up in the one sheepfold.

Now when the shepherd came to take his sheep out, he would stand outside the gate and call them and only his sheep would come out.

Jill and I took our children to a sheep auction in Wensleydale many years ago. The auction was full of sheep dogs. The sheep dogs were roaming free all over the place and we saw our famer on whose land we had parked our caravan.

We spoke to him for a few minutes before he said that he must get on, at which time he whistled his dog and only one out of the two or three dozen dogs came to him, in the same way a shepherd's sheep would only respond to its own shepherd in ancient Israel.

And Christ also speaks to us individually and we know his voice, each of us has been called to do a specific job in his kingdom, and by and large as no two people are the same so are our tasks not the same, but whatever we have been called to do God will provide us with the tools to do it.

In verse 15 Jesus said, "Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." This raises the question of how well he knows God, in fact he tells us in verse 30 further on in this chapter that he knows him intimately, because he said, "The Father and I are one."

So that is how much he knows him, and the answer is, very well indeed, and Jesus goes on to say, And I lay down my life for the sheep." Again, the inference here is that he knows all sheep well, all of whom he longs to be members of his family.

In verse 16 he is referring to the other sheep that are in the sheepfold which were then not a part of his flock which I suggest are of course all of us the Gentiles, of whom he said, "I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice."

And then there will be one flock and one shepherd. In chapter 17 verse 21 Jesus prayed, that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that you sent me."

In recent years we have had churches together in Sandhurst, a small but nevertheless an important move towards being one body in Christ in this parish.

In verse 17 Jesus declares his power over life and death by saying, “I lay down my life in order to take it up again.”

Verse 18 is important for our understanding, Jesus says, “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again.” Jesus laid down his own life on the cross, and he took it up again on the third day. Jesus was not a reluctant martyr but a willing saviour carrying out the purpose for which he came.

The last section of verse 18 reads, “I have received this command from my Father.” God planned the saving of mankind in the life, death and resurrection of his Son, and Jesus acknowledges here that he was complying to his Father’s will, to lay down his life when God required him too, so that we who believe and trust in him may inherit eternal life.

Let us pray.

You came, Lord Jesus, to teach us the way of life that you require, to show us how we are to serve you and our neighbours; make us receptive to your teaching and to your gospel and help us to live a life of service to you, without counting the cost, to your glory.

Amen