

The Good Shepherd

A sermon given on Sunday 21st April 2014 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst by Rev John Castle (Choral Evensong)

Readings Ezekiel 34:1-16

John 10:1-18

Introduction: what kind of animal are you?

If I were to ask you to choose an animal that in some way sums up your personality, which animal would you choose? Would it be a lion – self-confident, fearless? Or a mouse, cautious and not wanting to be in the limelight? Or a dog, faithful and companionable?

I don't imagine many of us would choose a sheep. We tend to think of sheep as rather unintelligent creatures, not thinking for themselves but following others. In our Western culture, we like to think of ourselves as independent, free-thinking, self-sufficient individuals – not members of a flock, following others.

But social psychologists investigating human behaviour have found that, by and large, human beings are pack animals. How we behave is massively influenced by our need to belong, our concern about how others think of us, whether we “fit in” and are “normal”. To make up our mind about something, we want to know what others think, what is considered an acceptable behaviour or opinion. We are, in fact, very like sheep. And Christians are no different in this regard. We seek to live according to God's ways, but for every hour we spend in church we spend 167 per week

absorbing the culture, beliefs and values of the world around us. I would like to think that Christians are less materialistic than others, but when you go to live in a poorer part of the world you realise how materialistic you really are. I would like to think that Christians have a distinctive approach to love, sex and marriage, but there are plenty of Christians who behave just like everyone else in these areas of life.

Sheep in the Bible

In Bible times, sheep were an important part of the rural economy, providing wool for clothes, milk for cheese, and , of course meat, both for eating and for sacrifice. The ancestors of the Jews, the patriarchs, were pastoralists. The leaders of the nation are often described in the Bible as shepherds responsible for caring for and guiding the nation as shepherds looked after a flock. David was taken from the sheepfold to shepherd Israel as its King.

But in general, things went downhill from there. In our reading from Ezekiel, God criticises the leaders of Israel for being bad shepherds who did not care about the sheep. God's concern for his people is such that he promises to rescue them and be their shepherd.

And of course, one of the best-known psalms is number 23 – *“the Lord is my shepherd”*. Here the poet pictures himself as a sheep cared for by God, who leads him to good pasture and refreshing streams, and whose protective staff gives comfort in valleys of darkness and fear.

Jesus the Good Shepherd

Jesus shows the same concern for people. In Matthew 9:36

we read of Jesus looking on the crowds with compassion, *“because they were worried and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”*. Isaiah says that *“we all, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us have turned to our own way”* (Is 53:6). In biblical times sheep were vulnerable to wild animals – wolves, bears and lions. They could also be stolen. So they needed a shepherd to lead them to safe places to feed and to gather them together at night into a guarded sheepfold. Often the shepherd himself might lie down and sleep at the entrance to the sheepfold, to guard the sheep during the night.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is both the Good Shepherd and the Gate to the sheepfold. He is the one through whom the sheep can find good pasture and abundant life (v10). He cares for the sheep so much that he is willing to lay down his life for them (v11). But there are others, the thieves and robbers who want the sheep for themselves and will use illegitimate means to get hold of them. There are also hired shepherds who are supposed to care for the sheep but at the first sign of danger think only of saving themselves (v12).

In today's world, we are just as vulnerable as were the people of Jesus' day. Perhaps the threats to us as Christians living in Britain are less about life and death and more about the negative influences of our increasingly secular culture. Young people are growing up with internet porn available with one tap on a smartphone screen. The media and social media promote the belief that happiness is found by looking perfect, owning a beautiful home, acquiring gadgets and finding the perfect relationship. But only Jesus can give “life

in all its fulness”.

Following the Shepherd

Christians are those who follow the Good Shepherd. Our reading from John ch 10, tells us that *“the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”*¹

Being one of Jesus' sheep of course is not just about having an individual relationship with him; it also means that you are part of his flock – the Church. We follow him both individually and together. The Church should be a place where people are cared for. This is in part the responsibility of leaders but it is also the responsibility of all of us. Do we notice when a brother or sister is sad or anxious, or absent from Sunday worship? If so, what do we do about it?

But the Church is not meant to be a holy huddle, cliquey or exclusive in any way. Jesus' words in verse 16 refer to others outside the Jewish community who were also to become part of Jesus flock: *“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.”* If we, like Jesus, open our eyes to those who live and work around us, there are plenty of sheep without a shepherd: people looking for satisfaction in life and for answers to deep questions, who, if given the chance, will listen to Jesus' voice and respond to it. Are we ready to welcome them into the flock too? And I don't just mean saying hello if they walk

¹ John 10:3-4 NRSV

through the church door, I mean reaching out to them as the shepherd goes out to seek the lost.

Conclusion

So being a sheep of Jesus isn't about drifting through life, following the crowd. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep and calls them by name. He knows us intimately, and he knows what will bring us abundant life. There is nothing he would not do for our true happiness. He even gave his life for us. He invites us to follow him, to let him be our Good Shepherd. If we follow him, listen to his voice and go his way, we will experience life in all its fullness.

We can either follow the crowd or we can follow Jesus. There are many other voices clamouring for our attention, many other ways to live. Do we listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd? And will we follow him?

Prayer

Lord, often we are tempted to go astray and turn to our own ways, or follow the ways of the world, instead of following you. Forgive us, help us to remember your amazing love for us, and teach us to recognise your voice and follow you day by day. May we also be people who lead others to find you as their Good Shepherd. Amen.