

Sermon May 7<sup>th</sup> 2017    [[John 10: 1-10](#); [Acts 2: 42-47](#); [1 Peter 2: 19-25](#)]

Michael Fluck, Reader, St. Faith's, Havant

*May I speak in the name of the one true God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen †*

### Introduction

Most of *us* don't have much contact with sheep, and we don't see many *shepherds* – except in sheepdog trials on TV. Then, it's fascinating to watch the shepherd using his well-trained dog to gather his flock together and drive the sheep through the right gateway.

Jesus' listeners were more familiar with sheep and shepherds. Sheep had a special place in their history. Figures like Abraham lived semi-nomadic lives, wandering over wild country with their flocks, which provided meat and milk, also wool to make clothes, blankets, and carpets for their tents. But sheep are wayward and vulnerable. They wander off in search of the next patch of grass. They're at the mercy of predators. They need looking after.

I got a feel for this in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, where the landscape, appearance of the people, the heavily-laden donkeys, called to mind the Old Testament. One day, following winding paths miles from the nearest village, we noticed some shaggy brown creatures wandering precariously among the rocks above us. A robed figure stood watching, occasionally calling them. On a distant hillside, we could just see a rough stone enclosure. Our local guide explained how each evening the shepherd would *lead* his animals to this sheepfold – he'd simply *call* and, recognising his voice, they'd *follow* - no need to *drive* them with a dog. He would then sleep across the entrance to protect them from jackals. Such shepherds were familiar figures in ancient Palestine.

The image of the Shepherd (with all it implies) occurs several times in the Old Testament. *God* is often referred to as a 'shepherd' (think of Psalm 23). The nation's *rulers* were also thought of in this way. We find *prophets*, like Ezekiel, angrily *condemning* the so-called '*shepherds of Israel*' (the rulers and religious leaders) for neglecting their 'flock' – *God* expects them to strengthen the weak, bind up the injured, heal the sick, bring back the stray, search for the lost; but *they* are too preoccupied with *themselves*. Ezekiel angrily warns that God will hold them accountable, and prophesies that God *himself* will save his flock - their *leaders* may not care about them, but *God* cares deeply (and he expects people to care about each other).

### Part 2

So, what's prompted *Jesus* to tell this parable? He's just encountered a blind beggar and, having compassion, he heals him. People are astounded – only someone sent by *God* could do such a thing. Yet, amazingly, the reaction of the *Pharisees* is to *condemn* Jesus because he's done this on the *Sabbath*!

Since the start of Jesus' adult ministry, the religious leaders, who see themselves as guardians of God's law, are alarmed and outraged by this carpenter's son from a little provincial town:

- despite having no training, he *speaks* with such *authority*, displaying such *understanding* of the scriptures;
- he shows little respect for *their* authority, and dares to *criticise* them for *hypocrisy* and for misunderstanding God's will!
- worse, he feels *entitled* to *disregard* the strict rules about the Sabbath.

What they find *most* disturbing, though, are his outrageous claims about his own special *relationship* with God (shortly after our reading he tells them "*the Father is in me and I am in the Father*"). And *now* he launches a thinly veiled *attack* on them in this parable about sheep and shepherds. What's he up to?

### [Part 3](#)

Jesus' *purpose* here is to *lead* people towards an *understanding* of who *he* really is, and *why* he has *come*. For centuries, prophets like Ezekiel had foretold that God would *intervene* decisively to *save* his people. And here Jesus uses the image of the intimacy and trust between a Middle-Eastern shepherd and his sheep to bring home the fact that *he* himself is God's long-promised Messiah.

By referring to '*false* shepherds', more concerned about themselves than with the well-being of the flock, Jesus asks "how can people *recognise* God's true 'shepherd' when *he* comes?". His *answer* is that:

- people will love, trust, and follow *him* in a way that they haven't followed the *false* shepherds (it was clear that people *had* been hearing *Jesus'* message and following *him*);
- secondly, like a *good* shepherd, *his* concern will be for the *well-being* of *all* those in his care – *even* at the cost of *his own life*.

God's *true* Messiah will be concerned that his people should have '*life abundantly*', as opposed to a distorted, stunted existence, or even total annihilation.

### [Conclusion](#)

Jesus' promise of *full life* for those who follow *him* ('the *good* shepherd'), remains as relevant for *us* as it was then. Aren't people in our modern world finding how *unsatisfying materialism* really is, and starting to look for something *beyond* it?

Looking around at our consumer culture, which continually creates *appetites* but rarely *satisfies*, which measures people's *worth* in terms of *getting and spending*, and looking at the growing *inequalities* between rich and poor, the increasingly *desperate* plight of so many of the world's people, the *damage* our consumer-driven life-style is increasingly inflicting on the *planet* itself and

on its creatures, it's clear that many '*false shepherds*' have been deceiving and exploiting people (while deluding *themselves* at the same time).

The call today is for Jesus' *true* sheep to *listen to his voice*, and to find *in him* (rather than in the values of *this* world) '*the promised life which is overflowing*'. At the end of our gospel reading, Jesus says '*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly*'. His own life and ministry *embody* this – showing loving concern for *all*, putting *others* before oneself, *sharing*, and above all recognising *God's* love for *all* people (even those on the margins).

My pottery teacher has one of those whimsical little notices on the wall of his studio; it says "*You've no idea how hard it is pretending that I'm a nice person*". It shouldn't be like that with those of us who follow *Jesus* – there need be no pretence.

Just after our gospel reading, Jesus tells his listeners "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep*". Like a Middle-Eastern shepherd, Jesus is calling *us* by name to *follow* him; and, if *we* truly place our *trust* in him, we'll do so *willingly* – not because he *drives* us but because we're drawn to *him* through love. Just think how *he* showed *his* love for *us* that first Easter. And, in *following* him we're *bound* to reflect *his* love onto those *around* us. (Our reading from Acts describes how those who *became* followers of the *risen* Jesus: *shared* what they had; *helped* those in need; had *glad* and *sincere* hearts; and *praised* God). As Peter says in his first Letter: "*It is through him that you have now come to trust in God who raised him from the dead and gave you hope ..... you have been born anew, ... love one another deeply from the heart ..... rid yourself of all malice, guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander ....*  
.... *conduct yourselves honourably [among unbelievers] so that [even] though they malign you ... they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God".*

Of course we're only *human*; we're *bound* to *fall short* sometimes. But we mustn't allow ourselves to be disheartened. That's the *point*. If we *sincerely* repent, we can be sure we'll find *forgiveness*. What's more, we're *not* in it *alone*. As Jesus promised his disciples, we can pray for strength and guidance through the gift of the Holy Spirit. What are we waiting for?

Amen †