

Jesus, our Good Shepherd

The Christian church has traditionally observed this fourth Sunday of easter as Good Shepherd Sunday. The image of a shepherd comes from the recognition that in the OT, God promises both to be shepherds (Ezek. 34:30-31) and to set a model shepherd over the people (Ez. 34:23-24). The clear definition of the shepherd's task is to feed the sheep adequately, care for their ailments, keep them gathered, and put their wellbeing before his own.

The Gospel of John develops the theme, moving from the OT imagery to the wonderful reassurance we find in Jesus as our shepherd. The Easter message is that Jesus returns and will be with us. Our assurance is based not on what we do or not do but on what Jesus does as the good shepherd. In the history of God's people, shepherds were rough around the edges, spending time in the fields rather than in a polite society. For Jesus, saying, *"I am the good shepherd"* would have been an affront to the religious elites and educated. The claim has an edge to it. However, some of the Old Testament (OT) prophets complained angrily against the religious leaders who had neglected the people. These prophets were against their leaders who were not keeping the sheep they had been entrusted with. They were not playing their role as shepherds. If we consider what a shepherd does, the image of the shepherd reminds us that God is especially concerned for those at risk, those who are vulnerable, reminding us that sheep are lost without their shepherd's constant vigilant care.

It must be noted that many distractions can persuade the sheep from the path. Therefore, Jesus promises that he will never let us go. His voice will bring us back. *"His sheep know his voice."* God is there, going before us and leading us and God's voice is heard by God's children. The sheep feels secure by hearing the voice of the shepherd.

Jesus is the good shepherd insofar as the model shepherd, as revealed in the scriptures.

"You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign LORD." (Ezek. 34:31)

"Woe to the worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock!" (Zech. 11:17)

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11)

Jesus says that the shepherd was the model who laid down his life for the sheep. There are many examples in the scriptures of leaders who were shepherds of sheep before they led God's people. Moses and David, as well as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, come to mind. They were entrusted with sheep to build them for their leadership role. In addition, God is portrayed as a shepherd in Ps 23 (*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing*).

Shepherd is an ancient way to describe the leadership of an earthly or divine leader, which was not uncommon. The shepherd refers in scripture to the work of both earthly leader and God, often in contrast to one another.

The role of the shepherd is to keep the sheep always together. If God in the OT is prophesied to be a shepherd who cares and would not let God's children go astray, then Jesus says, *"The father and I are one."* The image of oneness with the Father shows that Jesus is filled with Oneness: one creation, one God, one People, one Belovedness. Jesus does not do math of War plus winning equals Miracles that prove Our God. Jesus' math adds the Many to God and to himself: All are One. *"Love your enemies," he said, and: "I, when I am lifted up will draw all people unto me."* Oneness with all is what Jesus stands for and what his followers represent.

Jesus the Good Shepherd gave us glimpses of the characteristics of this good shepherd. Three repetitions of Jesus's declaration, *"I lay down my life for the sheep"* (John 10: 11, 15, 18)

¹¹ *'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

¹⁵ *just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.*

¹⁸ *No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.*

unify the sections. It is impossible to lay down your life for someone if you do not love such a person. Love is known in action. How do we see God's love? It is through God's sending Jesus Christ into the world and through Christ's action of laying down his life for us. The actions of Jesus show us who God is like. The same test applies to our love. How do others know what is in our hearts? It is by our actions. Just as God's love is known to us through the visible action of Christ, so our love is known to others through concrete actions that reflect Christ's own. Christ lays down his life, and we are to lay down our lives for others.

Believing in Christ means believing that Christ saves us by making us like himself. We have faith in Jesus and are Christ's representatives in our neighbourhood. Faith and love are bound together as a single package. Faith in Jesus Christ transforms the believing heart into a self-sacrificed heart. Faith and love together are the gifts of single grace—they are God's doing. We cannot receive one without the other. God is love. Jesus, the very love of God incarnate, is always present in our acts of love.

It is clear from 1 John 3:16-24 that the way Christians bear fruit is to love one another. To stand firm, to tell the truth in faith and love. It can be challenging, but that is what Jesus did for us, and it is our call to stand in the gap for others.

Reflect on Peter in Acts 4:5-12, who was summoned to the chief priests so that he may be restrained from talking about Jesus; it was in their presence that he continued testifying about the resurrection and the life of Jesus. It should have been easy for Peter to be angry and speak against the authority, but God's Spirit moved him and chose to share the truth about God. He admonishes us that we must sometimes be mindful of what we say when we are angry, but instead we must speak with love, showing our faith in God and in truth, as Jesus did.

Jesus is our good shepherd; he comes to us to save us, he comes to us to lead us if we give him permission, and he is always ready when you invite him into your life. In Acts 4:12, *"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."*

Peter announces that no human being or human authority can erect a religious tent – a temple or a church movement- and says, *"Unless you come into my tent, you cannot have God."* God has acted on behalf of the whole humanity in Jesus Christ, and there is "no name," no human channel, that can make an exclusive claim to religious power – no denomination, no one theology, no sect, no franchise on the power of the Spirit, only Jesus does. Our Lord Jesus Christ comes not to destroy but to bring healing and salvation.

Jesus acts as the Father has acted for generations – knowing the people fully, as he and the Father know one another. Jesus is the model shepherd, in two ways.

First, he cares for the sheep, even dying for their wellbeing as one of God's shepherds' oughts. Secondly, his relationship with God's people, his flock, is the same as, and modelled on, the mutuality of his relationship with God.

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