

## Easter 3: THE GOOD SHEPHERD

John 10:1-10 [MW17-12]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 07 May 2017

There's a cartoon I like about sheep and shepherds ... [Slide 1]

It seems to me to illustrate why we need a shepherd

- and not just any old shepherd, but a darn good one  
there's a lot out there that might lead us astray
- some of it is designed to deliberately entice us off the right path  
some of it is the traps and snares of life

Now, maybe you don't like to think of yourself as a “sheep”

- but in my humble experience I truly do believe  
that I, you, we need someone to follow
- someone to guide, protect and heal us  
someone to encourage and watch over us

In his first letter Peter writes:

“You were like sheep that had lost their way

but now you have been brought back to follow the shepherd and keeper of your souls.”

(1 Peter 2:25)

I find it comforting to know we have that – someone who brings us back

- someone who gathers us and watches over us  
sure sounds like a “good shepherd” to me

So let's think about “shepherds” for a moment

- we're in a country with plenty of sheep and a good few shepherds [Slide 2]  
so what does a modern shepherd have ... ?  
some education and training, maybe a diploma or degree  
laptop or tablet or some other 'smart' device  
reference and management manuals  
stock agent or farm advisor  
dogs, horse, quad bike
- a shepherd in New Zealand today doesn't usually have to sleep in the open  
there are huts for mustering time  
and most nights are spent in a warm bed
- and a big plus: shepherds here don't have to worry about wolves, lions or bears  
though there is of course drenching, docking and shearing

So what makes this person a “good” shepherd? [Slide 3]

- how would you judge whether or not this person was a good shepherd???
- something to do with their care for the sheep?  
percentage returns?

The experience and lifestyle of shepherds in Jesus day, and their equipment [Slide 4]

- was somewhat different  
for a start we know that shepherds were not always welcome in the towns they were often a bit 'rough and ready' and looked down on
- they can't have always been reliable  
because Jesus is takes great care in describing himself as the “good” shepherd which means there must have been an awareness of bad ones!

That being said, a shepherd's life was very hard

- no flock ever grazed without a shepherd, he was never off duty  
there was little grass and the sheep were bound to wander
- and as there were no fences, the sheep had to be constantly watched  
sheep were always liable to wander off and get lost in the craggy deserts
- in spite of what the paintings might tell us  
the shepherd's life was not one of idyllic pastoral bliss
- besides being constant it was dangerous  
the shepherd had to contend with wild animals – especially wolves  
and there were always thieves and bandits about

The shepherd's equipment was very simple [Slide 5]

- an animal skin bag for his food – bread, dried fruit, olives, cheese  
a sling, a weapon of offence and defence which also had a special use
- when a shepherd wished to get back a sheep which was going astray  
he slung a stone to land just in front of the straying sheep's nose  
as a warning to turn back ... the skill of shepherds and their slings was legendary!
- then there was the staff, a short wooden club with a lump of wood at the end  
a weapon for defending himself against marauding beasts and thieves
- and the rod, like a shepherd's crook  
with it he could pull back a sheep which was straying
- and at the end of the day as the sheep went into the fold  
the shepherd held his rod low across the entrance to the fold  
examining each sheep as it passed under  
to see if it had received any kind of injury

Sheep back then were kept mainly for their wool

- and so were often with their shepherd for years and years  
the shepherd and the sheep got to know one another well  
and very often each individual sheep was named by the shepherd

So what makes this shepherd “good”? [Slide 6]

- care for his sheep  
constant vigilance, making sure none strayed or were injured  
protected his flock from preying animals and thieves
- his relationship with each sheep, giving them names

This is what one traveller observed of Palestinian shepherds:

When you meet him, sleepless, farsighted, weatherbeaten, leaning over his staff and looking out over his scattered sheep, every one of them on his heart, you understand why the shepherd of Judea sprang to the front of his people's history; why they gave his name to the king, and made him the symbol of providence. Why Christ took him as the type of self-sacrifice.

Constant vigilance, fearless courage, patient love for his flock

- these are the necessary characteristics of the shepherd

Let's just pause and remind ourselves of a couple of things [Slide 7]

- why do we need a shepherd ... what makes a good shepherd?

Jesus points out what makes a shepherd good

- a shepherd does not come to where the sheep are kept at night through the roof or the window
- a shepherd does not climb over the wall
- a shepherd *does* lie across the entrance to the fold to protect the sheep
- and there is one very important point about a good shepherd
- a very important distinction between thieves and bandits and the shepherd ...

... the shepherd calls his sheep and they follow him

- John 10:4 says the shepherd goes ahead of them and the sheep follow him because they know his voice
- they know his voice

Another traveller in Palestine wrote:

The shepherd calls sharply from time to time to remind the sheep of his presence. They know his voice and follow on; but, if a stranger calls they stop short, lift up their heads in alarm, and if it is repeated, they turn and flee because they know not the voice of a stranger. I have made the experiment constantly.

Sheep know their shepherd's voice - Jesus says:

- They will not follow someone else, they will run away from such a person because they do not know this voice
- as I pointed out at the beginning, Jesus is not just talking about sheep he is talking about you, me, all people
- Jesus is talking about the "other voices" in his day and the "other voices" today there are other voices and they do clamour for our attention voices which speak comfortingly, encouragingly, arrestingly sometimes temptingly silky smooth
- there are people who claim to be leaders, even that they are sent by God people who claim to have the secret of happiness, the key of life

Think of the choices facing especially our young people today ...

- in behaviour and morals, education
- how to spend time and money
- think of what seem to be the 'goals' of 21<sup>st</sup> century life
- security, comfort, individual happiness, job, home, family leisure
- consider also the lure of advertising
- movies, tv, song lyrics, everything available on the internet

Oh yes, there are other voices

- and Jesus says emphatically people will not follow someone else and indeed why would they need to
- when there is one voice and one voice alone
- that will lead them where they will be protected and cared for and find all that is necessary for life

And yet it is all too obvious that people do follow other voices [Slide 8]

- it is equally obvious that they are not running away from these voices  
so I have been wrestling with that over the past week  
because Jesus was so emphatic people would not follow another voice
- but they do and it doesn't seem to add up, until ...  
until I thought, perhaps people do not know the voice of their shepherd
- perhaps people are responding to all sorts of other voices  
because they do not hear and recognise the voice of the Good Shepherd?

We have been considering 'what makes a good shepherd'

- perhaps we should also consider: "what makes a good sheep"???
- what do "sheep" need to do?
- ... listen for the voice of the shepherd, and follow

During World War 1, some Turkish soldiers tried to steal a flock of sheep from a hillside near Jerusalem. The shepherd, who had been sleeping, suddenly awakened to see his sheep being driven off on the other side of the ravine. He could not hope to recapture his flock by force single handedly, but suddenly he had a thought. Standing up on his side of the ravine he put his hands to his mouth and gave his own peculiar call, which he used each day to gather his sheep to him. The sheep heard the familiar sound. For a moment they listened and then, hearing it again, they turned and rushed down one side of the ravine and up the other toward their shepherd. It was quite impossible for the soldiers to stop the animals. The shepherd was away with them to a place of safety before the soldiers could make up their minds to pursue them – and all because the sheep knew their master's voice.

Being able to hear and recognise the voice of our shepherd is a matter of life ... and death

- Jesus says when we follow him we will "come in and go out and find pasture"  
to come and go unmolested was a Jewish way of describing a life that is  
absolutely secure and safe
- following a shepherd is freeing rather than restricting  
Jesus promises a new sense of safety and security  
Jesus promises that when we hear and respond we will have life
- life "running over" - not just abundant but overflowing  
a life really worth living

Praise God that we are not sheep without a shepherd

- there is a Good Shepherd  
do you hear his voice? he is calling you today
- yes, there is a clamour of other voices but Jesus knows us  
knows us and calls us, each one of us, by name
- his voice and his voice alone is the voice of life  
the voice of life now and forever  
listen for that voice and follow

So let's take a moment to be still and listen – then I will conclude with a prayer [Slide 9]

*Good Shepherd,*

*Teach us to follow you; to care for all that are close to us*

*and to reach out in compassion to those who are far away.*

*Help us to recognise our connectedness, and love as you have loved us.*

*May we be faithful to calling you give us to be shepherds in your name. Amen*