

## THE GOOD SHEPHERD

John 10:1-10 [MW20-17]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton, Sunday 03 May 2020

What do we know about shepherds and sheep in New Zealand?

- there is mustering, huge flocks  
heaps more sheep than people
- horses, quad bikes, helicopters even are used  
dogs, shearing sheds, yards, dipping, drenching, sheep trucks, freezing works
- fertiliser, computers, farm advisors ...

Then there are these words from the Shirley Murray Christmas Carol:

*Shepherds and musterers move over hillsides  
finding not angels but sheep to be shorn*

Contrast this with the image of a “shepherd” in the Bible

- this was an image often used to describe the relationship between  
the people of God and the Lord God
- it was an image that conveyed someone caring for  
and being devoted to a group that was dear and special
- it was part of the tradition of the Hebrew people  
it was in their DNA, woven into the very fabric of their existence  
going right back to their ancestor Abraham  
whose nomadic lifestyle was governed by the search for pastures
- it was an image used by the prophets to call leaders and people to account

The “image” of the shepherd was special and important

- the reality however was something different again  
for in real life, ‘flesh and blood’ shepherds were not highly regarded
- they were seen as dirty, uneducated, uncouth  
you definitely wouldn’t want your daughter to marry one
- they did an important job  
but on the whole it was preferred if shepherds remained  
‘out of sight and out of mind’ ...

... except when it came to this image, this way of thinking about how the Lord God

- relates to the people who see themselves as God’s “flock”

To understand this better, we need to know more about the life and work of a shepherd

- way back then  
because it is so very different from being a shepherd in Aotearoa New Zealand  
in the twenty first century

Sheep these days tend to be farmed in flocks numbering hundreds, even thousands

- in Biblical times flocks were much smaller  
so much so that a shepherd would know recognise every single sheep in his flock
- a shepherd would usually name his sheep and would know them so well  
he could see straight away if they were off-colour or hurt
- a shepherd did not have a dog to herd or drive his flock  
he would lead and they would follow

The shepherd's job was to know where to find good pasture and fresh water

- and lead his flock there
  - a shepherd carried a staff, and sometimes a sling, to protect his flock from wolves, bears, lions and yes, thieves
- a shepherd would sleep out with his sheep
  - sometimes this would be out in the open
- other times there would be a "fold", a low walled four-sided structure with no roof, and an opening to go in and out of, but no "gate"
- the shepherd himself would sleep across the opening
  - he would literally be the gate
- no sheep could get out and no intruder could get in
  - without the shepherd being aware

There was indeed a special relationship between a flock and their shepherd

- a shepherd would look for a sheep that was lost or injured
  - an injured animal could expect to be carried on the shepherd's shoulders
- a newly born or sickly lamb would be tenderly held in the shepherd's arms
  - and was often kept in the folds of his cloak
- big, burly, rough and gruff shepherds often were
  - but they had a big soft spot when it came to their lambs

One other thing about this special relationship between shepherd and sheep

- was that a sheep knew the voice of its shepherd
  - a lost or injured sheep would listen for the voice of the shepherd and call in response
- a sheep could pick out the voice of its shepherd from the surrounding noises
  - from all the other voices that may be calling, and follow that voice to the shepherd

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.

When you take a moment to consider all that

- I think it's pretty clear why the people of Israel
  - had a very fond image of the Lord their God as a shepherd
- and why Jesus in John 10:14 described himself as the "Good Shepherd"

What does this mean for us today, that Jesus is our "Good Shepherd"

- it reminds us first of the relationship: Jesus knows you
  - Jesus knows your characteristics and can recognise you from a distance
- he knows when you are well and when you are struggling
  - and what's more he cares and will come to your aid
  - when you are lost or straying, Jesus will seek you out
- Jesus knows you by name
  - Jesus knows you!

Jesus promises to lead you, me, us, his flock

- to green pasture and fresh water  
we may not be there yet  
but that is the end, that is where we are heading
- that is where we will get to with Jesus as our shepherd

We are reminded that there are dangers

- maybe there are no lions or wolves  
but there are many things that threaten to destroy us  
if we have Jesus as our shepherd he will protect us
- there are other untrustworthy voices clamouring for our attention  
all sorts of promises and advertising  
people who tell us to “do this” and all our problems will be solved
- we are not to listen and most definitely not to follow  
but to recognise the voice of the Good Shepherd  
and go only where he leads us

We are living in a very difficult time

- there are many things about the future that are uncertain  
the one thing we can rely on is that we have a shepherd, a Good Shepherd  
who can and will lead us through

Sometimes at the end of my sermon I give some “homework”

- a take home thought or a challenge  
so how about this ...

Write out on a piece of paper a verse from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm each day

- hand write it, starting with verse 1  
then put it on the fridge, the bathroom mirror, in your diary, by the calendar  
somewhere you will see it during the day  
and read the verse, reflect on it
- do this each day  
and by the seventh day, as a bonus  
see if you have managed to memorise the whole Psalm
- and I promise you  
it will make a positive difference

Jesus Christ, Son of God, Lord of the wind and waves, doer of miracles

- vanquisher of evil, conqueror of death  
is also Shepherd of his people, his flock

I invite you to reflect on this as we join in singing or listening to “The Lord’s My Shepherd”

- a version written by Stuart Townend and sung by Joanne Hogg  
the words are on the hymn sheet