

Yr B Easter 4 Good Shepherd Sunday 2018 Based on John 10, 11-18

The fourth Sunday of Easter each year is known as Good Shepherd Sunday, and on this day we most fittingly read the 23rd Psalm. And each year we also read a section from the 10th chapter of John, from ‘the Good Shepherd parable’, which in its fullness, is a complex parable whereby Jesus describes how he is shepherding his followers. The image of God as Shepherd is an ancient biblical concept, dating from even before the writing of the 23rd Psalm. Not only was God the people’s shepherd, but the Kings and other men in authority were also seen as shepherds of the people, responsible for the care of the people, especially the vulnerable ones. But I wonder if the idea of Jesus as their shepherd would have been a new concept for the disciples.

Today we have just read a small section of the larger parable, so for it to really make sense for us, it is helpful and necessary to put this parable into the context of John’s bigger story.

Now, just before Jesus goes into this ‘shepherd discourse’ John tells the story of Jesus’ healing of the man who was born blind, whom the religious authorities throw out of the synagogue because he has come to truly believe that Jesus has come from God and he tells the authorities that they are the ones who are not seeing the obvious. He reminds the temple authorities that never in the history of time had someone who was born blind received their sight, and yes it was Jesus who had healed him. So unless Jesus had come from God, there really isn’t any other explanation. When the temple authorities question Jesus about this healing, Jesus accuses them of being too blind to see what has really happened right before their eyes, too blind to recognize who he is. Remember this story?

Good! So, it’s on the heels of this story that Jesus tells his followers the shepherd and sheep parables; how he is the true shepherd and the sheep know their shepherd’s voice and will follow him. He tells the story of thieves and bandits who have to sneak into the sheep fold to try to steal the sheep, because the ones who truly know the shepherd’s voice won’t follow the thieves. Can you see where Jesus was going with this...?

Jesus goes on; thieves steal from the flock to line their own pockets, without any regard for the wellness of the sheep they’re stealing. Now, hired hands, they’re just paid to care for the sheep, but when the going gets tough -- they’re outta there, putting their own safety before the sheep. And that leaves the sheep defenceless to danger! Remember, shepherds in those days lived with the sheep out in the hills and mountains and large predators like lions were a real threat. For the hired hand it’s just a job, he isn’t really invested in the flock like an owner would be. The hired hand’s first priority is to and for him or herself, and their paycheck, and if it comes down to their own wants and needs or that of the flock, well, guess who wins out. And having hired people to look after our sheep, I can attest to the trueness of that statement!

Now, Jesus is making some pretty heavy accusations here, he is, through story telling calling the temple authorities, these synagogue and community leaders out on their less than ideal ‘shepherding skills’. They are the ones who by the laws of Moses are charged with the care and nurture of the people—Jesus is saying they are no better than thieves, bandits and hired hands!

So, who are the sheep, the people of Moses to put their trust in? Me, Jesus tells them, I am the Good Shepherd. Now, *kalos* is the Greek word which is translated into English as ‘good’. However ‘good’ doesn’t give us the true fullness of the Greek meaning. Not just is *kalos* good, but it “implies that which is ... ideal, model, true, competent, faithful and praiseworthy”¹. Jesus is much more than the *Good* Shepherd, but the model shepherd, the ideal to which we should aspire. He is faithful and worthy of our praise.

¹ Barbara J. Essex in Homiletical Perspective for John 10: 11-18 in Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol. 2

I am the Good Shepherd, Jesus reassures them, their true shepherd; the one who provides them with lush green pastures to lie down in—pasture so thick and abundant with grasses that they become quickly fed, and even have time to rest and be restored. And he leads them to fresh clean water to assuage their thirst. In a land as drought prone as biblical Israel, that was saying a lot! The shepherd will lead them only in the right ways not because he benefits from their well being, but because of who he is, he is not just hired to watch over them, he is their Lord. They are safe and protected with this shepherd, the rod will stave off any predators and the staff, well if they fall down in the crevice in the rocky pasture, or get off the path, the shepherd's staff will lift them up, will guide them back to the right way.

I am the Good Shepherd, Jesus tells them yet again, I know who my sheep are, you can trust me to care for you, and you know that, you know me, listen for my voice. In fact, *I am willing to lay down my life for my sheep*. That is how much I care, I will trade my life to save yours—because I choose to, not because God told me to, because I want to. And that is just what he did!

Now, this is an important statement Jesus makes. This refutes an argument that I've heard and maybe you've heard people who question Christianity will say. What kind of a God would send his Son to die such a tortured death? Well, God didn't order Jesus to die, Jesus chose that, out of love for his people. **That's** the kind of Lord we have!

And as I was writing this, the paradox of this occurred to me. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, yes, but Jesus is also the Lamb of God. Like the lamb at that very first Passover in the time of Moses, the lamb whose blood was used to mark the doorposts to tell the angel of death to pass over that household. Here is another paradox of our Christian faith: The Good Shepherd is also the Lamb of God. The shepherd who came to call them and lead the people back to the Creator God becomes the lamb who dies to save them.

There's more to this story, Jesus tells his disciples: "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." (vs 16)

This is an amazing statement, especially for its time. One flock, one shepherd – Jesus is open to bringing in all who hear his voice and know him to be the true shepherd! All are welcome? Really? Jesus is the shepherd to not just the Jews, but for non-Jews too? I wonder how many believers he lost with that statement?!

This is opening the gate to the sheep fold pretty wide, don't you think? What was it that St. Paul said? We are all one in the Lord, Jews, Greeks, men and women, slaves and free. That is what the early church did, helped everyone who needed it, welcomed everyone. So, what does that mean for us today if all are welcome, if there are none of those social barriers? Colour of skin doesn't matter, ethnicity doesn't matter, gender doesn't matter, sexual orientation doesn't matter, religion or denomination doesn't matter. Still today this is radical and challenges us to our own prejudices.

One flock, one shepherd: Jesus is calling out to those who don't yet belong, those who are without the Shepherd, who need to be welcomed in. What a great statement about the kind of Lord we have, one who goes to extreme lengths to show his love to everyone, regardless of who or what they are, who shows compassion and concern for those who don't know the love and security of being in the flock, and part of the flock. It's also a great statement about the kind of a sheep fold we are to be—an open minded and loving place where all are welcome, where we share Christ's love, and reach out to those in need, those outside our fold. We have that wonderful sense of security knowing we are in the care of the Good Shepherd, the one who calls us, whose voice we hear and follow down the right paths, who promises us an abundant life. Full of that assurance, we don't need to be afraid, for even at our darkest times, we know the Good Shepherd is with us. Full of the assurance of this love and goodness, we can allow the voice of the Shepherd to speak through us, to reach out to those who are not yet in the fold, and share how God's goodness and mercy follows us, and how we know the Lord is with us, forever. *Rev'd JoAnn Todd, Rector: The Regional Ministry of Hope*

