

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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GOOD SHEPHERD

13th Aug 2018

John 10:11-30
Romans 5:6-11

When someone is baptised in this church, whether as a child or an adult, we use these words:

Jimmy (or whoever) for you Jesus Christ came into the world:

For you he lived and showed God's love;

For you he suffered the darkness of Calvary and cried at the last "it is accomplished";

For you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life;

For you he ascended to reign at God's right hand.

All this he did for you, Jimmy, before you knew anything of it.

And so the Scripture is fulfilled: "We love because God loved us first."

When I was thinking about Jesus' pronouncement "I am the Good Shepherd" I kept thinking about this, because, like the passage which we read from the letter to the Romans, it reminds us that what Jesus has done and continues to do for us is often hidden from our sight, beyond our knowledge, but immensely important to us nevertheless.

When I was a small child, I used to be taken to Cults church in the middle of Fife, Pitlessie is the village for the church, but the church is out in the fields a couple of miles from the village. Sitting in the family pew there, we looked right at a large stained-glass window which I thought incredibly beautiful. It showed Jesus as the good shepherd. His feet are in a shallow burn, and he has a lamb over his shoulder. Thinking about it now, it is probably good old Victorian sentimentality, but it appealed to me as a child. It is the kind of picture many of us probably have in our minds when we think of Jesus as the good shepherd, a description which we are very familiar with.

The thing is, though, that the good shepherd, the one who slept across the gateway of the fold to keep his sheep safe, was doing a difficult and a dangerous job. The most famous shepherd in the Old Testament is David, who was to become king. When he is arguing with King Saul about why he should be allowed to go out and fight the giant Goliath he mentions the experience he has had with his father's flock in keeping off lions and bears. Lions and bears! (Or as they say in the Wizard of Oz, "Lions and tigers and bears, O my!") And that was the reality of the middle eastern shepherd. There were dangerous wild beasts out there in the wilderness. And there were dangerous wild people, who were not above taking a sheep or two and if that meant hurting the shepherd, why not?

And what did the sheep know about that? What did the sheep know of these lions and bears and would be thieves? Nothing. Not if they were looked after by a good shepherd. All they would know, as we read last week, was that they could go in and out and find pasture. They would never know the sleepless nights, the practising

with slings or other weapons, the dangers that the shepherd was taking on for their sakes.

I am the good shepherd, said Jesus. And it was a great way of declaring himself to be both David's descendant and to be God. Old Testament prophecies spoke of both David's descendant and of God as coming to shepherd his people. Jesus is both, and he is the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for the sheep.

In terms of actual shepherding, it would probably be folly for the shepherd to lay down his or her life for the sheep. If the shepherd is killed by the marauding beast – Jesus talks of wolves – then the sheep are not helped. Quite the reverse. Now they have no one to protect them and look out for them. This is why all those involved in rescue missions of any kind – hill rescues, sea rescues or working in overseas aid in war-zones – are always counselled not to get into a situation where they become the casualty rather than the helper. In human situations, laying down your life, very often just compounds the problem.

But Jesus is the good or great shepherd, and he is not just working in the realm of the dangers that we can see. He lays down his life for us, as Romans says, to save us from the great disaster of being separated from God. And he did it before anyone understood that this was what he was about, before we had even been born. What he took on were not the lions and bears, but the forces of darkness, our fallen human nature which would pull us towards selfishness and away from God's way of self-giving love. What he took on were the things that would keep us from knowing God, from hearing his voice, from being his children and following in his way. He is not just the shepherd who paddles in the burn on a dappled summer day for us, but the shepherd who fights, fights to the death, to save us, his flock. We have a lot to be thankful for.

For we too are the sheep that Jesus shepherds. When he told the Pharisees that he was the good shepherd, they would be thinking only of God's original people, Israel. But Jesus knows that, and so he tells them that he has sheep of other flocks which he must bring to make one great flock. One flock. One shepherd. It was a radical idea for his first listeners, who assumed that the flock of God was and always would be limited to those in their ethnic and religious sheepfold. But their own scriptures are full of hints, and more than hints, that the choosing of Israel was only so that they could then draw all other nations and ethnicities into God's loving care even those – which was most of them at times – who were deemed to be enemies. This insistence on going beyond Israel, going to the Gentiles, was one reason that Jesus' own people found it hard to hear what he was saying and hard to recognise God's voice in his.

And so they argue more about whether or not he is worth listening to. That was all at the feast of booths, Sukkot, held in the autumn. John then skips us forward to the next festival, Hanukah, the feast of dedication, which happens in the winter, on the 25th day of Chislev, which is roughly equivalent to December. The feast of dedication is when the Jews celebrate the victory of Judas Maccabaeus who in 167 B.C. drove out the tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes and caused the defiled temple to be purified and re-dedicated to the worship of God. It was another figure like Judas that the people were looking for – to restore the nation's heritage and to become their king – as Judas did.

They gather round Jesus and they ask him when he is going to tell them if he is that longed-for messiah. He has told them and told them, and his I Am statements have

been a clear telling for those who would listen, but they ask again. And Jesus says to them that he has told them and that his works have shown them, but they do not believe, and so do not belong to his sheep. (And that is the answer to whether or not he is to be the Messiah figure of the type that they are looking for: if he were, then there would not be some Jews who he could say were outside his flock.) And then he gives the defining quality of his sheep. "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." And then the promise: "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand..."

They know my voice and they follow me. How well do you know Jesus' voice? When you are going through the activities of your day, when other voices and thoughts are coming at you, how easy is it for you to discern Jesus' voice and follow his way? There is only one way to become acquainted with his voice, and that is to spend time in his presence.

I wonder how many of us think of prayer as something that we "ought" to do rather than as a delight and the breath of life for us? Probably most of us at some time. But it is only as we truly discipline ourselves to spend time with God, to pray and listen and pray again that we will get to know the voice of the good shepherd. As many of you know, prayer, which is more than just bringing God a list of our wants, though it can begin that way, is something which grows on you the more you spend time in it. It is only as we practise the discipline of prayer that it will become more than a discipline to us and become part of the way that we think and as natural as breathing. And when we do that, then it will become ever easier to hear the voice of our good shepherd. Hearing is the first stage and following is the next. And then the promise is that he will give us eternal life – and that we will never be snatched from his hand.

That security is what it means to belong to the shepherd's flock. The good shepherd who protects us from dangers so well, that most often we aren't ever aware of them holds us secure. When Jesus said I am the good shepherd he was telling about the security that God gives us and the protection God offers. As grateful members of his flock, let us do our bit in listening to his voice and following where he leads, even if it is to new pastures and different ways of doing things. Amen.

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