

Sermon on Sunday 25 April 2021

by Geoff Oates

Readings: Acts 4. 5-12; John 10. 11-18

'I am the Good Shepherd.'

Like so much of John's Gospel, this passage drips with rich theology. Beneath the words we hear there are meanings that would have been easy to spot for those who heard the words of Jesus when He first spoke them for, and those who read them when the Gospel was first written down.

We will look at a couple of these deeper meanings, and after I'll tell you a story.

I am the Good Shepherd. Would those first listeners have thought of a man looking after sheep in neighbouring fields? Probably not. They would have thought of the prophet Ezekiel, who had spoken out in anger against the corrupt and unjust rulers of Judea, maybe 600 years before. Ezekiel called them Bad Shepherds.

Through Ezekiel's words, God promised to send a good shepherd, a leader who would rescue His people from poverty and oppression. A leader in the tradition of the great King David, who, you might remember, was working as a real shepherd before God chose him as the man to succeed King Saul.

When He says, 'I am the Good Shepherd,' Jesus is not boasting about His pastoral skills. He is declaring himself to be the promised agent of God's new Kingdom. What His hearers would call the Messiah.

Jesus says 'I am'. The ancient Hebrew for 'I am' is 'Ehyey'. But 'Ehyey' is also the name of God, revealed to Moses from the burning bush on the foothills of Mount Horeb. The name that

was adapted to Yahweh in ancient times, and to Jehovah in our time, but was considered too sacred to speak out aloud, or even to write out in full.

Seven times in John's Gospel we hear Jesus say the words, 'I am'. 'I am the true vine.' 'I am the Bread of Life.' 'I am the Way.'

Ehyey the Good Shepherd. I AM the Good Shepherd. Again, Jesus is not talking about His pastoral skills. He is claiming that special, intimate relationship of union with the Father. The Messiah who is not merely sent by God, but who is God come to live and act among us.

Now, we can talk a bit about sheep!

I always find Google Images a really valuable tool for theological research. If you search for 'Good Shepherd' in Google, you'll find row after row of pictures and paintings of a tall, calm Jesus, in clean, tidy robes with well trimmed hair and beard, surrounded by nice clean white sheep and lambs, in lush green meadows. It's never raining, and there are no sheep droppings anywhere.

But in between them you'll also see a few pictures of real shepherds, mostly old men with shabby coats and weathered faces. These are surrounded by, well, let's say sheep coloured sheep, either on boggy British hillsides or on arid Middle Eastern scrubland.

Looking after sheep in the real world has always, of course, been hard, dirty work.

Kath and I had a real 'lost sheep' moment many years ago on the slopes of Great Whernside in the Yorkshire Pennines. It was a cold, rainy day late in the year, and we hadn't seen a living soul on the path we were hiking up since we left our B&B in Kettlewell. Down below us in a gulley, we spotted a sheep. Lying down, completely motionless, and for all we could tell,

dead. We watched for some minutes, unsure what, if anything we should do.

Then, out of nowhere, a man appeared on the bleak, misty hillside, scrambled up the gulley, briefly inspected the sheep which still showed no sign of life, then unceremoniously grabbed its back end and shoved with all his might. The sheep staggered to its feet, and with no evident sign of either distress or gratitude stumbled off down the gulley.

The farmer followed her without any fuss, and we could see how his coat was now covered in water, mud and greasy lanoline where he had taken hold of the sheep. Then he disappeared into the mist, and Kath and I realised we had seen a living parable, with a spark of new life, even of resurrection.

I don't know how many sheep that shepherd had in the fold, maybe there were the biblical 99 from that other parable Jesus told, but he knew one was missing, somewhere on the misty hillside, and he came to find her. Here was a good shepherd. It was all in a day's work for him.

That's an image of Jesus that makes wonderful sense to me. Because I know what kind of sheep I am. I'm not a cute white woolly lamb. I'm wet, and muddy and smelly, with a thick greasy coat of self-interest which I use to keep my**self** safe and warm. Prone to sloth, good at wandering off in the fog, heavy, hard to help, and not very good at saying thank you. And quite likely to get lost again the next day!

God knows all that. But He still wants me in His flock, and at His side, and has come looking for me more than once, found me and got me moving the right way again. And, I'll be honest, sometimes I too have needed a pretty rough shove from behind.

A good shepherd doesn't mind getting his hands dirty. He knows that is part of his job. We have a Saviour who has gone further than that, a Saviour who will let His hands get bloody,

with the wounds of the nails of a cross. He knows that is part of His job.

A Saviour who will lay down His life for his people. A Saviour who will take His life up again, and live it with and for His sheep, sharing with us the revitalising energy of His new life. Amen

