

Reflection 25th April 2021
John 10: 11-18 and Acts 4: 5-12

The wandering figure of the good shepherd, tending his sheep to the point where he is willing to surrender his life for them, is the image Jesus uses about himself in today's Gospel. It's one of the most popular images of pastoral care - the shepherd who leads his sheep and protects them from harm is an image that runs through the whole Bible. In fact, it contains over a hundred references to the shepherd.

In the time of Jesus, the flocks spent most of the year from about March to mid-November, on the open uplands. Hyenas, jackals and wolves roamed the hills, and the flocks were also at risk from robbers. The shepherd was usually armed with a knife, a sling shot or a cudgel. The shepherd's care and courage were legendary. When the young David was anxious to convince King Saul that he was capable of fighting Goliath, he said: ³⁴ "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, ³⁵ I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. ³⁶ Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. ³⁷ The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine." (1 Samuel 17: 34- 37).

When Jesus said “I am the good shepherd” this is the background against which his listeners would have heard his words. Our experience of sheep and shepherds is rather different, so to understand the analogy clearly, we need to keep this picture in mind. In saying the ‘good’ shepherd, Jesus is implying that there are ‘bad’ shepherds as well. The good shepherd puts the welfare of the sheep above all else, including his own life. He lives for the sheep. They are his friends and companions; he lives his life among them and it is second nature to think of them before himself. On the other hand, the ‘bad’ shepherd is in it solely for the money. They’re not his sheep. He’s not that concerned about their welfare other than the consequences to himself should he lose any. When things get difficult, he’ll abandon the sheep to their fate. To be clear about what makes a good or a bad shepherd, let’s think about the difference between a good doctor and a bad doctor. It’s not just the doctor’s skill and knowledge that we weigh in the balance. We factor in their bedside manner, their compassion, kindness and sympathy before deciding if the doctor is a good one. A doctor may be technically very able but he needs to exhibit these other qualities to qualify as a good doctor and earn our trust. If he doesn’t care about his patients, he is lacking a very important dimension to his practice. It’s the same with the shepherd. The point Jesus is making is that those who work only for the reward of money or status think only of themselves. Those who work with love and compassion think chiefly of those they are serving.

In all of Jesus' dealings with his people he showed love, compassion, and patience. We are the sheep who learn to trust the shepherd who cares for us. We come to know his voice because we have learned to associate it with his love and know that he has laid down his life for us. The love the shepherd has for his sheep is costly to the shepherd not to the sheep. It is self-less and it is courageous. We are in the sheepfold, and know that we are safe and secure in his love.

"But" says Jesus in verse 16, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd". The Jews have lived for centuries in the knowledge and belief that they are God's chosen people. They have an exclusive relationship with him. Jesus is telling them here, that there are other people who belong in the family of God who will come to know him as they do. As we read through the four Gospels, we see that initially Jesus' concern was for the 'lost sheep of Israel' (see Matthew 10: 5-6). But his care and compassion spread to other peoples culminating in his command to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). As John says, Jesus Christ is "the light of the world" (John 8:12), not just the light of the Jews. As he taught his disciples, he was preparing them to take the Good News to the whole world.

In his life and in his death, Jesus sought out the lost and the least and the last. When he wanted to speak of a tender God, he told the people about a shepherd who, when he loses one of

his sheep, leaves the other sheep and goes off in search of the lost one. The shepherd refuses to accept the loss of one sheep as 'just one of those things'. He searches for the lost sheep until he finds it, and then taking it on his shoulders he returns to share his joy with all his neighbours (Luke 15: 1-7).

Whichever church denomination we are, we all belong to the same flock whose loyalty is to the one 'good shepherd'. That is where our unity lies, in following the same shepherd regardless of which fold we find ourselves in. In order to be brought into the flock, people need to hear about the 'good shepherd'. It's our responsibility to join the Apostles in their great commission, the mission of the church to 'make disciples of all people'. The good shepherd challenges our own way of leaving people for lost: "I have come to seek out and save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Probably all of us know people who have wandered away from the Church, who have lost their sense of belonging or who have never belonged in the first place, who feel they have no community to belong to. People who are struggling in the midst of this pandemic to find purpose and comfort. At the end of our reading from Acts Peter says "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." If we know people who are living outside the love of Christ, it's up to us to find them for Christ so that he can draw them into the 'one flock' where they will come to know the voice of Jesus, and the love of Jesus, and the salvation that only he brings.