

The Good Shepherd

Please note that this article is also available as an audio file on our website if you wish to hear it read, instead of reading it yourself.

The reading this morning is John 10:1-16.

Introduction

John chapter 10, contains one of the famous "I Am" sayings from John's Gospel; it's the passage in which Jesus declares Himself to be The Good Shepherd, the one who cares for the sheep of God's pasture. And of course, we, the followers of Christ, are the sheep to whom Jesus is referring. This passage speaks about the great love, compassion and mercy that God has for His people, and it is a fulfilling the OT prophecy from Ezekiel 34, where God, judging the false and wicked leaders of Israel, says:

"For... I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness." (Ezk 34:11f)

There is much to learn from this rich passage of Scripture in John's Gospel - far more than I can deal with in this short address, so I'd like to draw out three simple points, if I may; and they are, that Jesus...

1. Calls His sheep
2. Leads His sheep
3. Feeds His sheep

Jesus Calls His Sheep

First point then. In verse 3, Jesus calls His sheep. So, if you are a true disciple of Christ – and by this I mean someone who has made a clear and conscious decision to be a genuine and active follower of Jesus, obeying His Word – then you have been called by Him. Meaning that Jesus Himself has called you to be His follower. Jesus puts it this way when He said:

"You did not choose me, but I chose you." (Jn 15:16).

Now that's an amazing thing actually, quite amazing. We may think that we make all our own decisions and that we have a full and free will, and indeed we have. But God's will, purposes and power are far greater and deeper than our limited understanding could ever grasp, and the reality is, we are followers of Jesus because He has chosen us. Indeed the New Testament calls the followers of Jesus "the elect" (see Mk 13:20, 1 Pet 1:1, Tit 1:1) meaning, "the chosen ones." This is an important NT principle. Does that mean then, that somehow God has over-ruled our own free will? Well no, our free-will remains intact. Now, I don't profess to fully understand this paradox or all of its implications;

but what I do know is that it is an enormous privilege, a huge privilege in fact, to be called into Christ's family. Again, Jesus Himself said:

"many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt 22:14)

One way of understanding this, is that through the person of Christ, whom God sent into the world (cf Jn 3:16) He is calling all people, everywhere to accept and believe in His Son. Many though (if not most) ignore His call, but a few respond – meaning the few that are chosen.

Jesus Leads His Sheep

Once they are called, Jesus then leads His sheep - but where? Where are we being led? In the passage Jesus says the Good Shepherd "leads them out". That can mean a number of things, but one thing is for sure, Jesus is leading us out of this world and into God's Kingdom, and that happens whilst we are still alive – indeed, it's the journey we are on now, our pilgrimage.

Leading us out of this world, means leading us away from all that defiles; all that is sinful; all that harms the soul and the spirit. In practice this means turning away from greed, jealousy, rage, lies, deceit, unforgiveness, theft and malice – etc. etc. And we are being led towards: love, mercy and faith; peace, truth and kindness; gentleness and self-control. Indeed Jesus told His disciples that:

"when the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth."

And the Psalmist said:

*"He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside quiet waters"*

Which brings us to our third point. Jesus feeds His sheep.

Jesus Feeds His Sheep

In verse 9, Jesus says that the sheep who follow His voice will find "good pasture", meaning good grazing – food. Jesus provides good food for His followers; His flock will not go hungry. But the food here is spiritual food; Jesus isn't talking about bread or meat, fish or cheese, but rather He is talking about feeding His sheep with the Word of God. As Jesus said elsewhere:

*"Man does not live on bread alone,
but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matt 4:4):*

Yes, Jesus understands that we need physical food, and in the Sermon on the Mount makes it clear that God will provide for our basic physical needs, but just as importantly, if not more so, we also need the spiritual food that God provides if we are to be productive, healthy servants of God, living a life pleasing to Him.

The spiritual food that God provides comes primarily through the God's Word – Scripture, the Bible. Jesus as the Good Shepherd, has provided the spiritual food we need, but sadly there are many Christians that just don't want it. Thus the Bible remains a largely closed book to them, and God's

Word something of a mystery. Just as an infant will ignore healthy, nutritious food, and instead only wants chips and chocolate, so many followers of Jesus shun the Bible, regarding it as dull and boring and mostly irrelevant. As a result, they suffer spiritual malnutrition without even realising it.

But this malnutrition stunts spiritual growth and stops Jesus' followers from properly maturing in their discipleship. And this lack of maturity shows itself in all kinds of ways, but in particular it shows up in our priorities and our behaviour; in our attitude towards others and in our response to adversity when things go wrong.

Now there is much more I'd like to say about this third point, because it's one of the single, biggest weakness of the modern western church. However, we'll have to leave it there for now. But I want to finish by asking you to remember that Jesus came into this world to seek you out, to call you to be His own. Indeed He gave His life that you might be forgiven and redeemed. And finally, He has provided all that you need to grow and flourish in this life, as you wait eagerly for the life to come. Amen.