

I love reading children's books, especially reading them with children! Probably a sign of my mental age, but children's books stir my imagination and allow me to enter into the silly world of childhood. A recent number one New York Times Bestseller is titled, *The Day the Crayons Quit*. Its an imaginative story about a crayon crisis. Poor Duncan just wants to colour pictures. But when he opens his box of crayons, and finds notes on crayons, all saying the same thing: We quit! Beige is tired of playing second fiddle to Brown, Blue needs a break from colouring in all that water, while Pink just wants to be used. Green has no complaints, but Orange and Yellow are no longer speaking with each other. The battle lines have been drawn. What is Duncan to do? I have just ordered my copy and will tell you what happens when I finish reading it! The good thing about children's books is that they are MUCH cheaper than others on best-seller lists!

Continuing on our theme of The Good Shepherd, we are in the book of Zechariah, the penultimate book of the Older Testament. Zechariah joins a list of prophets calling the Hebrew people to pause and examine their behaviour which is demeaning God. They worshipped anything and everything EXCEPT God, and as a result, stripped God of all dignity and respect. Let me read a few verses from Zechariah chapter 10, verse 2 and following ...

Zechariah is writing to the Hebrew people who, some 20 years prior, had returned to Jerusalem from their second exile in Persia (their first exile was in Babylon - Iraq). The Babylonians tried to crush the Hebrew people, by destroying their local customs, their worship rites and rituals, and their social life. The Persians, however, allowed the Hebrew people to practice their own religion, but taxed them heavily to finance a war with Egypt, so the Hebrew nation had no money left to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem.

The enthusiasm with which they returned from exile in Persia was soon replaced with discouragement. It is so typical of human nature: when things don't happen the way we want, we become discouraged and depressed, and abandon things we hold dear, and follow anyone or anything which offers hope.

So it was with the Hebrew people. Their hopes and dreams were not being realised; what they wanted, was not happening. God is either no longer concerned about them, or is busy with other things, so they turned to household gods and diviners.

"Household gods" or, "family idols" were known as "teraphim". Archeological discoveries have shown that the "teraphim", when installed in the home, took over leadership of the family, the title deed to the family assets, and ownership of property. We are naive to

think idol worship is just that - worshipping idols, considering idols as gods. The truth is, idol worship or idolatry is a wilful act of inviting into our homes and handing over control of our lives; all that we are, and all that we own, we give over to occult powers.

A lot has been said about the foolishness of idolatry. Isaiah uses the imagery of a carpenter-craftsman who grows trees and cuts them down; a part of the tree he use to keep himself warm, another part he uses to roast meat and bake bread, and finally when he is warm and well fed, tells himself, ***This tree has been good to me; it is like a god to me. With the remaining wood, let me make an idol and worship it, that the tree would continue to provide food and warmth for my comfort.***¹

Jeremiah goes further, describing the craftsman decorating the hand crafted idol with silver and gold and fastening them with hammer and nails, and says, ***Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field. They cannot speak; they cannot walk and have to be carried; do not be afraid of them, for the idol can neither do evil, nor any good.*** While the idol cannot do anything good or evil, the idol is a conduit for occult powers.

Zechariah also warns against diviners: fortune tellers, clairvoyants, psychics, crystal gazers, who use the powers of the occult, to forecast the future. They have a unique technique of making you believe they know your past, and therefore you can trust them, when they tell you the future.

Remember ***The Predictions of Nostradamus?*** I watched the first of two VHS videos, broke off for lunch, then sat down to watch the second VHS video. The opening lines by the commentator was, ***Now that we have seen Nostradamus' predictions come true in the past, lets' see what he has to say about the future!*** Can you see the trap? I have gained your confidence by telling you things of the past which you now believe I have the power to do; let me tell you the future, and make you believe it, as true.

Diviners have been active throughout history: the Philistines had them², Babylon had them³, Israel had them⁴, divination was the cause of Saul's death⁵, even after Jesus' time on earth, a girl with powers of divination, try to infiltrate Paul and Silas' team⁶.

¹ Isaiah 44:9-20

² 1 Samuel 6:2

³ Ezekiel 21:21

⁴ 2 Kings 17:17; Jeremiah 14:14; 27:9; 29:8-9; Micah 3:6; Ezekiel 12:24; 13

⁵ 1 Chronicles 10:13-14 (1 Samuel 28:3-25)

⁶ Acts 16:16-18

God is very clear in his instruction to the Hebrew people who are about to become a nation. He says, *When you enter the land that God, your God, is giving you, don't learn the abominable ways of life of the nations there. Don't you dare sacrifice your son or daughter in the fire. Don't practice divination, sorcery, fortunetelling, witchcraft, casting spells, holding séances, or channeling with the dead. People who do these things are an abomination to God, and because of these abominable practices God, your God, is driving these nations out before you.*¹

They may not tell you and it may all seem very innocent, but all diviners dabble in the occult, and lead people astray.

Why is this important? Why must we understand, God abhors and detests diviners and idol worshippers?

Once again, it starts at creation. God created this world with a purpose, and placed us in charge of His creation. The temptation we fell for, was to be enticed into a future, in which we could be "like God", when we were already created in the "image of God"!

Its like a salesman trying to sell you a car which is **LIKE** the Rolls Royce, when you already own a fleet of range Rolls Royce cars, parked in your garage, with the door open for everyone to see!

The question before us is this: can the person who promises a future, deliver on his or her promise?

Zechariah answers this question. God knows that the people have gone astray into idol worship and consulting diviners, because the shepherds appointed to lead the people from the front, have themselves abandoned their role as spiritual leaders. Having rebuked and censured these shepherds, God steps in.

Zechariah the prophet speaks the word of God, "***The Lord of hosts cares for His flock***" (10:3) and goes to say, *I will strengthen, I will save* (10:6), ... *I have compassion on them and they shall be as though I had never rejected them, for I am the Lord their God and I will answer them!* (10:6). God makes Himself accountable to His chosen people!

Tucked into the opening lines, is a very descriptive and telling phrase, "***The Lord of hosts cares for His flock ... and will make them like His majestic steed in battle***".

It is a tough one to get our head around, but the message is this: **The Good Shepherd invites us to be honoured with Him.**

¹ Deuteronomy 18:9-14. Similar but brief instruction are given in Leviticus 19:26, 31; and 20:6.

Cast your mind back several years when Her Majesty the Queen used to ride a horse to the tramping of colour and various other formal ceremonies. When she rides the horse, who is the object of honour? The Queen as she rides the horse.

But the horse is honoured to share in the majesty of the Queen, and the pomp and circumstance of the occasion.

Zechariah picks this image when he says, "***The Lord of hosts cares for His flock ... and will make them like His majestic steed in battle***".

In Psalm 23 we read about the Good Shepherd who ***cares and lifts us up***; in Jeremiah we read about the Good Shepherd who ***offers hope***. Ezekiel introduced us to the Good Shepherd who ***leads*** from the front.

As the period of history before Christ draws to a close, Zechariah reminds us, God has not stopped caring for His flock. So great is His love, that when He rides in majesty, we too shall enjoy the privilege of being ***like His majestic steed in battle!***

The flock that was lost and abandoned to wolves and wild animals (idol worshippers and diviners) by appointed shepherd is transformed and restored, from wandering sheep to majestic warhorse.

The Good Shepherd is the shepherd of the whole flock, not exclusively for the Hebrew people, but the ***whole flock***, which includes us.

The Good Shepherd ***cares*** for you; the Good Shepherd ***offers you a real and tangible hope***; the Good Shepherd ***leads*** you from the front, and the Good Shepherd ***honours*** you with His majesty! Next week, the Good Shepherd is no longer talked about; He takes on the form of a human being and comes to pitch His tent among us, that we may get to know Him, learn from Him, enjoy His company, be blessed into wholeness by Him, and through Him be restored to the Father.

Our challenge this morning is to learn to accept the leadership of the Good Shepherd. Like the crayon-crisis, our world is in crisis mode. Beige is tired of playing second fiddle to Brown and is ready to revolt; Blue wants a break from colouring in only water; Pink yearns just to be used, somewhere; Orange and Yellow are no longer speaking with each other. The battle lines have been drawn, and the battle rages.

The Good Shepherd waits patiently for each one to give up their claim to goodness and greatness, and allow Him to lead them, care for them, provide them and honour them.

Will you accept His gift to you and His leadership in your life?

AMEN