

Six weeks ago we embarked on a study of “The Good Shepherd” starting with the much loved Psalm 23. This Psalm echoes through the pages of the Bible; the sentiments expressed, the words used and the description of God, all together, anchors the theme of the Good Shepherd. Three prophets we studied also used Psalm 23 to undergird and profile the Good Shepherd as one who *cares* for you, *offers you a real and tangible hope*, *leads* you from the front, and *honours* you with His majesty! A fortnight ago, we examined Luke 15, which I think has a misleading title of “The Prodigal Son”, and discovered the Good Shepherd taking on the form of a human being, teaching us of His great love to “find us” and “restore our soul”, which is to say, welcome us back into fellowship with Him.

Today we open the pages of Mark’s gospel account, to chapter 6, verses 7-42. It is a large section, so instead of reading it (which you can do at your leisure at home), I shall introduce each of its parts as it unfolds. On the surface, Mark 6 is a very unlikely passage to explore the Good Shepherd, but several sources agree, this passage “find its values not on the surface, but beneath it”¹.

Ken Bailey, who spent his life the Middle East living among people he loved and respected, refers to Mark the Evangelist as a “modern camera man and television editor (who) in order to cover an important event, collects as much footage as possible ... then reduces the great volume of material collected ... (finally) arranged and judiciously edited to communicate their perceived meanings”.

This passage has five narratives, which tell one story: the sending of the twelve on their first missions trip, the account of John the Baptist’s beheading by Herod, the feeding of five thousand men plus women and children, Jesus appearing to the Twelve walking on the water in the midst of a violent storm, and finally a campaign-like crusade to bring the sick before Jesus for healing. Mark connects these five seemingly disparate and apparently unconnected narratives, to contrast the Good Shepherd who empowers, empathises, feeds, protects and heals, with the “bad shepherd” who is uncaring, selfish, and through his own foolishness, brings death and misery.

¹ “The Good Shepherd: by Kenneth Bailey (SPCK) 2015. p.153

Chapter 6 opens with Jesus' return visit to his hometown of Nazareth. The weakness of the human spirit is very evident: we don't know how to deal with someone else's success, especially when that "someone else" is known to us. The people of Nazareth are no different. ***How can he (Jesus) do better than us? None other than a carpenter's son ... where does He get the wisdom and the ability to do these things? He is one of us, and now comes to us to tell us how to live our lives!***

During our study of the Gospel of John earlier this year, and later in Paul's journeys, we discovered and learned that skepticism (doubt) and jealousy go together. We find it difficult to accept God's gifting to others, we doubt the person and their motives, and green-eyed monster appears in full form. ***I don't understand what He is doing; I cannot accept the fact God has gifted that person; why don't I have that gift - after all I am better than that person ...*** Mark uses this dismal narrative at the top of chapter 6, to teach us a very significant lesson. He says, ***Jesus could do no mighty work there in Nazareth, except He laid His hands on a FEW sick people and healed them.*** (Jesus had crowds thronging around Him, to hear Him speak and to be healed by Him, but in Nazareth, only A FEW were healed!).

Mark goes on to say, ***AND HE MARVELLED AT THEIR UNBELIEF***, which is to say, ***Jesus was astounded at their unbelief; He could not believe the extent of their unbelief!***

James the brother of Jesus, wrote a letter to the Jews, those who became believers and followers of Jesus Christ in which he says, ***You do not receive (God's blessings), because you do not ask*** (the phrase "you do not ask" means, ***you do not ask in the spirit of prayer; you do not approach God recognising He is able, and wants to answer your prayer, and He will***).

There are many who doubt, not God's ability to answer prayer, but they doubt His desire to answer their prayer; harbouring this doubt, they close themselves to receiving God's blessings. This was the scene in Nazareth - they doubted Jesus' identity and closed themselves to receiving God's blessing.

The disciples were with Jesus during the Nazareth incident and witnessed what happened. Jesus felt it necessary, therefore, to teach them about rejection and failure. He sets two conditions on their mission trip: first, they are allowed wear sandals and carry a staff to ward off dangers such as rabid dogs, but nothing else, not even a change of clothes (not put on two tunics²). The focus of their journey is to carry nothing else other than a message about the imminence of the Kingdom of God, inviting people to repentance (which is to, “accept to be found”), cleansing them of evil spirits, and healing them.

The second condition of their mission was a lesson in the “theology of failure”³: when you are welcomed into a home, stay there and fulfil your ministry. But if you are not welcomed in a home, leave and make sure you don’t take even the dust of that home with you. In other words, don’t let even the fine dust of that home, become part of your baggage, which will affect and change you in ways you may not know. It is not you the Disciples who have failed; the residents of that home have failed to accept the saving grace of God. The problem is theirs, not yours.

The first lesson in this section is that the Good Shepherd will always lead His flock to green pastures where they enjoy the blessings of God, but not everyone trusts the Good Shepherd. Some suspect His motives, others distrust His intentions, and still others presume He cannot be as good as they are. The people of Nazareth thought, ***Jesus has not lived here for a long time; he moved away and has not lived here, how does he know what is good for us?*** It’s not familiarity which breeds contempt; its pride and disrespect for the other person, which produces scorn and rejection and contempt.

This first section, verses 1-6, Mark contrasts the sheep who don’t care about the Good Shepherd and doubt He has anything worthwhile to contribute to life (the people of Nazareth), and the sheep who listen and obey the Good Shepherd because they have learned to trust Him (the Apostles).

² Mark 6:9

³ Bailey p. 157

One of the skills the Apostles learned from Jesus was the art of story-telling, and Mark is about to further demonstrate his skill.

Mark now takes two narratives, of Herod's banquet and Jesus' feeding of 5,000 men, plus women and children, to contrast the "bad" shepherd (Herod) with the Good Shepherd (Jesus).

Herod is told by some badly informed people, ***John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and now inhabits the person of Jesus.*** There is nothing like mixing bad rumour with bad theology to confuse people, which leads people to wrong decisions which in turn bring hurt and pain in others.

Herod had mixed feelings towards John. When John told Herod, his marriage to his brother's wife, Herodias was morally wrong (Leviticus 18:16), Herod's conscience was pricked. He knew he had done something wrong, but demeaning his brother by taking his wife away from him, delighted him more! On her part, Herodias disliked John with a vengeance.

So, on his birthday, Herod invited everyone of any social standing: the entire royal family (Herod was after all "King of the Jews"), all military commanders, and all elected officials. At the height of the party of several hundred people, in a drunken stupor, Herod promised a dancing girl (our modern equivalent of a pole dancer performing at a private party), "half of his kingdom". Prompted by her mother Herodias, Herod's bitter and angry wife, the dancer asked instead for John the Baptist's head, **NOW!** The executioner returned with John's head on a platter which gave the girl. This poor girl, who was set up by her mother, would have been traumatised for life!

The senseless brutality of John's beheading, coupled with the fact that John was much loved and respected, would have set the countryside on fire. The religious hierarchy did not have a response to their own "king's" mindless and insane action, and the Romans watched at a distance. The Apostles who were out in the towns and cities on their first missions trip, came back to Jesus as hastily as they could and gathered around Jesus (30) who, sensing their discomfort and distress, called

them to, ***“come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while”***. They were exhausted with many people coming and going, they had no leisure, even to eat! (31).

The Good Shepherd knows when his flock is unsettled and upset. Jesus took the Twelve by boat to a desolate place to be by themselves; the Good shepherd wants to make them lie down in green pastures, by still waters and refresh their soul. But the crowds were relentless. They feared Herod’s madness and drew closer to Jesus.

What follows is the pivotal verse in this narrative: ***Jesus saw the crowds and He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd (34)***. The “bad” shepherd is indifferent and cruel; he is erratic and cannot be trusted, but the Good Shepherd is compassionate and tender, His heart goes out to the lost and the searching. He will never turn away anyone who comes to Him.

Now Mark contrasts the drunken orgy that was Herod’s birthday bash, with the feast Jesus provides for 5,000 men (v44), plus women and children, from a food stock of two fish and five loaves of bread. Not only did the crowd of around 15,000 - 20,000 people eat to their fill and were satisfied (v42), but the disciples cleaned up afterwards, picking up 12 baskets-full of broken pieces.

Note, 12 disciples filled 12 baskets to the brim with broken pieces. The “broken pieces” were not half eaten morsels tossed across the countryside, as we see after Glastonbury, or the day after Proms in the Park.

When Jesus gave thanks to God for what seemed to be an amount that would feed no more than one small family, He broke the bread and gave it to the disciples to set before the people (v41), which is to say, the flat bread was torn into sections to serve as a plate, on which the fish that Jesus divided, was served. Each “broken piece” the disciples collected, was a portion of bread broken by Jesus and a section of fish divided by Jesus!

The “broken pieces” were what the crowds ***could not eat***; the “broken pieces” was not half eaten bits they wasted.

Herod fed the rich and powerful at a banquet which ended with death and the people left frightened, horrified and dissatisfied, perhaps even with severe indigestion at the sight of a freshly scalped, bleeding head on a platter!

Jesus the Good Shepherd, however, fed a crowd of common folk and ordinary people, significantly more in number than Herod's invitees, which ended in people being fed to their fill and completely satisfied, a banquet which ended in life and pointed people to eternal life!

I personally know of people, and perhaps you do too, who are not very well-to-do, who invite people they see as lonely, needing friendship and company, for meal at their home. They know the portion they cooked would barely be enough for two people, but in the end, they witnessed for themselves, without their guests knowing, that the food fed more than four, everyone was full and satisfied, and some even had a small portion to take home for another meal!

Mark's account goes on to demonstrate the Good Shepherd's actions of protecting His flock. Following the feeding of 15,000 men, women and children, and the cleanup of the countryside after them, Jesus knows the Twelve are more than exhausted, and sends them off in a boat. A storm whips up in the middle of the lake and the disciples are barely able to make any headway. Exhausted beyond all energy they had, when they saw the silhouette of a person walking on water towards them, they were terrified and screamed at the top of their lungs, until Jesus climbed into the boat, and in that instant, the winds died down and the sea was calm.

"For goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever!" (Psalm 23)

Mark presents us with a powerful image of the presence of the Good Shepherd, ***among us***. The Good Shepherd is not out there somewhere, minding His own business, playing His flute, smelling the heather, or even further away, polishing the stars to sparkle and shine; the Good Shepherd is here, now, among us, and with us. He is present when He sends us out to proclaim Him and live for Him; He is

present in **our** success and **our** failure (note, He never fails. His plans and purposes are always achieved; we may fail with our plans and purposes, but our failure does not make **us** a failure). The Good Shepherd is present when we are exhausted from the demands of life and leads us to green pastures and still waters. The Good Shepherd teaches us never to doubt His ability to do the impossible, and the Good Shepherd heals and restores us to the fulness of life.

Is there anything else you want the Good Shepherd to do for you?

If there isn't, what stops you from placing your complete trust in Him? What prevents you from making yourself vulnerable to Him, allowing Him to control your life, to lead you to still waters, to refresh your soul, to prepare a banquet for you and to give you a permanent home in His Father's House?

If there is nothing stopping you, then lets pray, and you can commit yourself to Him.

AMEN.