

## Sermon 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021

Who do you trust? Why do you trust them? How far do you trust them? We are going to spend a few minutes thinking about trust.

We are going to look at just the first verse of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, "*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.*" David when he writes this Psalm uses the image of shepherds and sheep to convey several important truths about our relationship to God and God's relationship to His people.

Us 21<sup>st</sup> century listeners or readers need a little help to understand these truths given we are so removed from David's time and know so little about shepherds and sheep. So, to get a clearer picture of what David was thinking about when he talked about shepherd let us use Jesus' definition of the Good Shepherd from our call to worship this morning. Firstly, the sheep were literally the shepherd's sheep, that is he or his family owned the sheep and he, the shepherd had sole responsibility for his sheep. This means that the Shepherd was invested in his sheep and what happens to them matters to him personally. As we will see in a few moments the sheep are not a mere commodity to the shepherd. There is, strangely a sense of genuine affection between the shepherd and his sheep. Secondly, the shepherd knew each sheep individually. I guess to you and me all sheep look the same yet any shepherd worth his salt could identify an individual sheep amongst his flock simply by looking at them. But even more than just being able to identify his sheep a good shepherd knew each sheep's character, their idiosyncratic ways and all the ways that they were inclined to get themselves in trouble. Thirdly, the Shepherd valued the sheep's lives over his own. This is seen rather obviously when the shepherd would defend his sheep from thieves or predators even if it meant being injured or laying down his life for the sheep. However, and less obviously the Shepherd also laid down his life by focusing his time and energy on the sheep. Being a Shepherd meant sacrificing time with family and friends to be with the sheep. It meant sacrificing an easy life at home for an itinerant life living rough far from home. It meant spending all his energies on providing for and protecting the sheep rather than himself. Fourthly the shepherd's purpose is to give life to the sheep and life in abundance. The shepherd just doesn't want his sheep just to survive, no he wants them to thrive. No shepherd wants his sheep just to have enough to eat, just to have enough to drink, just enough to get by. No, the shepherd wants to

provide an abundance of all his sheep need so that the sheep are healthy and productive. For the Shepherd, his life is all about his sheep.

In our call to worship Jesus call Himself the Good Shepherd, in other words the shepherd who embodies all these qualities. So, Jesus as the Good shepherd is deeply concerned about His sheep, it really matters to Him what happens to the sheep. Jesus as the Good Shepherd knows His sheep individually, He recognises them and understands them. Jesus as the Good Shepherd is prepared to do everything to protect His sheep, even to give up Heaven, even to laying down His life on the cross. Jesus as the Good Shepherd wants to gives His sheep a life of abundance so that they are healthy and productive. Jesus, as the Good Shepherd life, is all about His sheep.

In our world, the word “good” means about the same as “OK.” “Good” is better than “bad” or “mediocre,” but it’s not in the same league with “excellent” or “outstanding” or even “tremendous.” But in the original Greek, the word “good” mean something that intrinsically good – the ideal – the best - perfect. In **Mark 10:17**, Jesus says that “no one is good except God alone.” So, the good shepherd – the only Good Shepherd – is God. Therefor by calling Himself the Good Shepherd Jesus is clearly affirming His deity once again.

So, what is the sheep’s relationship with the shepherd. Before we go on, we need to clear up a common misconception that sheep get by well on their own. Sheep without a shepherd and left to their own device’s will find many different and inventive ways to die. Some years ago, Gillian and I had a smallholding, and we were considering getting some sheep. I asked a farmer friend for some advice on caring for sheep. John, the said farmer spent forty minutes explaining all the ways sheep could die including, getting stuck on their backs and dying of suffocation, being attacked by insects, having their brains and eyes eaten by insect larvae, being attacked by dogs, being frightened into a heart attack by imagining a dog or even a rabbit is going to attack, drowning, suffocating in snow, hoof infections that poison the blood, if they get too hot or if they get too cold and somewhat grizzly when their stomachs exploded because they have eaten too much grass and gasses build up in their stomachs and are unable to pass wind. John very emphatically went on to state that unless we were prepared to devote our lives to caring for the sheep, they would be dead within days

of them arriving. John even went as far as to suggest that sheep were so perverse that they would simply drop dead, possibly explode the moment we turned our backs out of pure spite. I was left wondering why John always had so many sheep on his farm and seemed to have a genuine affection for them. I also wondered how many of his sheep had found inventive ways to die during our conversation. Gillian and I decided not get sheep after Johns encouraging chat.

For the sheep, life is all about the shepherd. Sheep despite not being candidates for Mensa quickly work out that the shepherd represent safety, food, comfort and even affection. The word for “shepherd” in Hebrew comes from the verb *ra’ah*, which has two meanings for the same spelling: to “shepherd” and “to like, be fond of, delight in, associate with as a friend.” In the context of Psalm 23, it is clear that *ra’ah* refers to a shepherd, but the ambiguity could lead one to associating the idea of being a shepherd with the idea of being friend. You could consider the shepherd as someone who likes, is fond of, delights in his sheep, associates with his sheep as a friend.

For the sheep all good things come from the shepherd, no wonder they recognise his voice and follow him. The sheep’s relationship with the shepherd is one of complete dependence on and trust in the shepherd. A sheep that doesn’t trust the shepherd is a very dead sheep indeed. Literally trust in the shepherd is all that keeps sheep alive.

David opens his Psalm with, *“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.”* David began life as shepherd he understood the relationship of shepherd to sheep and sheep to shepherd. David understood that God was his Shepherd, his great provider, his protector, his all in all. David understood that as one of God’s sheep his life was dependent and completely reliant on God and could be trusted. Because David understood his total dependence on God and God’s unfathomable good will and love for him, he could make this amazing and challenging statement *“I lack nothing.”* Next week we will see how the Lord provides for David and for us as we continue to think about the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

Before we move on, notice David says that the “Lord is my shepherd”. In this declaration David has and is continuing to choose to trust and follow God his shepherd. This is a choice which confronts us all in each moment of our lives, who is our shepherd, whose voice are we following, who do we trust? Our world today, as it was in Jesus time is filled with many voices calling people to follow them, to trust them. As

with the Pharisees there are many people today who demand you follow their voice only to bring them power and prestige, they are not interested in those who follow, their sheep. There is only one Good Shepherd who is truly interested in His sheep even to the point of laying down His life for them and that is Jesus Christ.

Charles Laughton was a famous English actor. Classically trained, Laughton performed in many of Shakespeare's plays in London and went on to star in a number of major Hollywood films during the 1930's and 40's.

Laughton was attending a Christmas party with family friends in London one year. During the evening, the host of the party asked everyone to recite a favourite poem or passage from literature that best represented the spirit of Christmas. When it was the turn of the famous actor Laughton skilfully recited Psalm 23 from the Bible. Of course, everyone applauded Laughton's excellent performance when he finished.

The last to participate was an adored elderly aunt who had dozed off in a corner. Someone gently woke her and explained what was going on. She thought for a moment and in a shaky voice the aged lady began to recite Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want..."

There was a slight disquiet in the room for a very brief moment as everyone realised the aunt wasn't aware Laughton had shared the exact same passage a few minutes earlier. Within a couple of lines something happened – the emotion with which this old lady spoke these famous words of Scripture took the gathering by surprise. When she finished there were audible sobs from some of those gathered, so unexpectedly moved were they by the re-telling of these ancient words.

When the party was over and Charles Laughton was leaving the host thanked him for coming, and then awkwardly commented on the difference in responses from Laughton's reciting of Psalm 23 to that of his old aunt.

Charles Laughton's response is said to have been: "Yes, well, I guess I simply know the Psalm – but she clearly knows the Shepherd."

My question to you is do you know the Good Shepherd, do you know His voice, are you choosing to follow Him, how much do you trust the shepherd?