

Rev. Isaac Bradshaw
Good Shepherd Sunday
April 25 2020
St. Brendan's Anglican Church

Jesus the Good Shepherd

Well, we're halfway through the Easter season. Halfway through that joyous time when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the grave, celebrate the destruction of Death and Hell, celebrate the vindication of our Lord in the face of crucifixion, torture and political murder.

And also, by the way, halfway to celebrating His return to heaven. And leaving us here, waiting.

Across the globe today Western Christians celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday. It's appropriate, I think, here halfway to Pentecost, to meditate a bit on Christ as the good Shepherd.

And, of course, across the globe today, people are hearing very similar stories, particularly those places, like here, where shepherding and sheep and various other agricultural activities are on the wane. I'm going out on a limb here, but most of us here may have heard of sheep, we may have seen a sheep, we may even wear the products of sheep. Some of us may even have "eaten" a sheep at some point. But most of us have not looked after sheep.

And so, across the fruited plain, pastors are engaging with their congregations in the same way, and tell me if you've heard this before... Sheep need a shepherd because sheep are dumb. They wander off, just to eat grass! They need protecting from wolves because wolves eat the sheep! They'll fall off a cliff, they'll get tangled up in thorns and lots of other things! And wouldn't you know it... We have a shepherd. His name is Jesus.

Anyone heard this sermon before? I know I have.

The thing is, I don't know whether sheep are smart or dumb or what. I know most people get really offended if you call them sheep; it suggests being a mindless follower, simply going wherever we're lead, always in a bit of danger because of our own inability to defend ourselves, needing someone to come along and take care of them lest they fall into a gorge or something. It has the really offensive attribute of being, on some level, true.

It needs to be said that such a reading of John 10 has the immense potential of leading to very strange and occasionally dark places. It's very easy for a community, particularly one

that has heard the “you’re a dumb sheep, listen to Jesus” sermon to quickly fall into “you’re a dumb sheep, listen to *me*.” You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, says the prophet Ezekiel to the false shepherds of his day. We can all think of ministers and pastors who have fallen to the dark side of power and authority, corrupted to abusive ends. We can name them. Tony Alamo. Jim Jones. More recently, we see pastors like Mark Driscoll and even well-known evangelicals like Ravi Zacharias be revealed for being manipulators and abusers. We could probably name some bad shepherds that we have personally encountered. In fact, In one survey, the number of sociopaths in the clergy is shadowed only by the number of sociopaths in politics and in the ranks of CEOs and upper corporate management. Instead of protecting, these shepherds devour. They’re not even the hired hands. We warn ourselves to be aware of sheep in wolves’ clothing... The true danger is in wolves in *shepherd’s* clothing.

The temptation, of course, is to go the “other” direction; instead of over-investing in authority and power, we over-invest in dis-order. Instead of a flock, it’s simply me and Jesus, no reference to others, no reference to what’s gone before, no reference to *who* has gone before or indeed, who exists around me; a distinctively American view of religious rugged individualism.

And throughout all of this... Jesus says... I am the good shepherd. Follow me. In his commentary on the *39 Articles of Religion*, Dr Oliver O’Donovan gives a picture of what this means; to be a sheep in the care of the Good Shepherd isn’t to be a mindless animal, but to be called into a gathered family of God; Jesus says to us and believers everywhere, “These are my sheep; these are my tribe, these are my brothers and sisters.”

Our reading from 1 John gives us a snapshot of that it means to be a member of the family of Jesus: we live in righteousness. The righteousness of the flock of Jesus is defined by adherence to the Law, the law that is given shape and form by the Shepherd: to live and die for one another. If the Easter season means anything, anything at all to us, it’s the realization that we have no reason to reject the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives to be bold in living and bold in dying for one another.

For the early church, this took the form of sharing and holding everything in common. We read in Acts 4:

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold 35 and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. 36 Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles

Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, 37 sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Pay close attention to that; great grace meant not a needy person existed among them. Owners sold their property and the proceeds laid at the apostles' feet and distributed on need. Note the order: belief in Christ... being of one heart and soul... "then" the sharing of all things. We tend to want to reverse that; to put the action ahead of faith, to see to the structural changes and then expect the change of heart and soul. We are Americans after all, getting the rules right is what we do best. Or at least, we try.

But to follow Jesus means first having the Hope in him that he will deliver us from death just as he was; it's that hope that shapes our purity and righteousness and propels us towards living and dying for one another. We may not practice holding all things in common, but at the very least, what we can share in common is our foundational hope in Christ Jesus and in his resurrection.

To be a sheep of Jesus' fold isn't to be dumb or blindly following whoever seems to be in charge for the moment. To be a pastor, a true Shepherd in Jesus' fold, is a challenge for all Christians. The sheep not of this fold are waiting for you and for me to live and die in righteousness, to share what we have with them, and to lead them to the Good Shepherd searching for them in the wilderness.

Amen.