

## JESUS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

One of the great themes of the Easter Season is Jesus the Good Shepherd, the one who lays down his life for the Sheep. In today's reflection we are going to look at the theme of the Shepherd, the sheep and the lamb of God.

I don't suppose it would be too much of a surprise to you that sheep are the most frequently mentioned animal in the Bible. Nearly 400 references, if you include references to flocks. Additionally, the figure of the Shepherd receives approx. 100 references.

Abraham, Isaac, Moses, David and Amos were all Shepherds; but Shepherds were not always men. Shepherdesses in the Bible include Rebekah and the daughters of Jethro.

This prominence of Shepherd language grows out of two main areas

- 1) The importance of sheep in the nomadic and agricultural life of the Hebrews and
- 2) Sheep and shepherds;

as we shall see make for an especially rich picture language helping us to grasp many strands of our faith. Perhaps, above all, stories about sheep and shepherds help us understand more deeply and profoundly the vital importance of pastoral care.

It is good that we frequently see sheep in TV programmes such as Countryfile, providing us with a very vivid and natural picture. Sheep in ancient Palestine were totally dependent upon their shepherd for guiding, protection, saving, gathering and leading. When the body of Christ the Church is functioning as it should, it too will provide this same nurturing care.

I quote now from the Methodist Ordination of Presbyters Service. "Be shepherds to the flock of Christ. As you exercise mercy, do not forget justice; as you minister discipline, do not forget mercy, so that when Christ the Chief Shepherd comes in glory, he may count you among his faithful servants". So Shepherding is rightly highlighted at ordination, but in truth we are called to "watch over one another in love".

Our prayers of confession each week provide us with the much-needed space to confess, amongst other issues, that our pastoral care of others is always all that it should be. In our Prayers of Confession, we would do well to acknowledge the words of 1. Peter 2. v25 "For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd the guardian of your Souls". In returning to Christ our Shepherd, we receive forgiveness and renewal.

Psalm 23, possibly the most well-known passage in the Bible is attributed to David, the Shepherd King and gives a beautiful description of the day in the life of a shepherd. Shepherds were the providers, guides, protectors and constant companions of the sheep. They were also figures of authority and leadership. So close is the connection between shepherds and sheep that to this day Middle Eastern shepherds can divide flocks that have mingled at a well, simply by calling their sheep (Jesus said, My sheep hear my voice).

Ezekiel 34 and 1 Peter 5 v 2-3 highlight examples of negative and abusive authority. Ezekiel clearly points out that the role of a shepherd is to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, seek out the lost and bind up those in need.

The prophets but especially Isaiah and Ezekiel look to the day when God will rise up, a leader from the line of David, who will truly be a good shepherd to the people in every sense of the word.

In several places in the Bible, God is spoken of as both the Shepherd of the individual as well as the people as a whole. See Ezekiel 20 verse 27; and Isaiah 40; verse 11.

Jesus, in one of his seven "I am" statements, as recorded in John's Gospel, totally embodies this concept when he rightly asserts "I am the Good Shepherd." This is forcefully brought home in the parable of the lost sheep, in which the shepherd leaves the rest of the flock in order to search for the lost sheep. The depth of the Good Shepherds' concern for the individual is beautifully brought home in the description of his rejoicing on finding the one lost sheep and placing it on his shoulders to take it home.

In Matthew 18 v 12 -24 Jesus explicitly talks about laying down his life for the sheep and in doing so on the cross, his life becomes a lived parable.

The Good Shepherd; Cares for and gathers in abandoned and scattered people.

The Good Shepherd actively seeks the lost.

The Good Shepherd also seeks out sheep further afield.

Clearly then our pastoral care stretches far beyond the boundaries of Church or indeed our local neighbourhood. Post Resurrection, Jesus commands Peter to be a Shepherd of the flock and he commands us in a similar way. (John 21 v15-17) Jesus says "Feed my lambs..... Tend my sheep..... Feed my Sheep"

Finally, Jesus the Messiah is both Shepherd and Lamb. In a stunning turn of phrase, the death of Jesus is spoken of as the death of a lamb. Jesus is not only the sacrificial shepherd; he is also the sacrificial lamb and in Revelation 7 v17 and 14 v4 he is described as both.

Let us Pray.

Let us pray for all who exercise costly patterns of care, and let us thank God for them.

Let us pray for the earth; that we learn to protect our environment and all life within it.

Let us pray for leaders of nations and communities that they may commit to shepherding with integrity, honesty and courage.

Let us pray for those in pain in body, mind or spirit.

Jesus, good shepherd we look to you and your example as a pattern for our duty.

Amen.