

“I am the Good Shepherd”

29th April 2012

Readings:

Psalm 23

John 10:11-18

Someone told me this week, “I’m rebelling against God. I’m asking why? Why is everything going wrong at present?” And he’s stopped coming to church. “Surely God’s there to help us in our lives and to protect us!” he feels. And that’s what this parable is about. But we must be careful how we interpret it.

I’ve spoken before about shepherds in Israel. Instead of having dogs to round up the sheep and to force them to do what the shepherd wants, the shepherd walks in front (I’ve seen it - in Bethlehem) and the sheep choose to follow him; they’re not compelled against their will. That’s why in verse 4 of the gospel reading it says, “He (the shepherd) goes on ahead of the sheep, and they follow him.”

At night in Jesus’ day the sheep were kept safe in a cave or in a thorn stockade. The shepherd would use his rod and staff as they came in through the gate. The rod was a long stick with a knob on the end, ie like a long club. This was not to hit the sheep with; it was to protect them against wild animals and thieves. And also the shepherd would count them in at night under the rod. A whole rush of sheep would be difficult to count, but if he held the rod out in his left hand, he could more easily count the sheep in. And then, if he was, right-handed, he would hold the staff or crook in his right hand, ready to catch any sheep that needed attention. If an animal was weak or ill, he could catch it round the neck without hurting it, and get it away from the flock. This is why in Psalm 23, “Your rod and your staff comfort me”: they are there for the benefit of the sheep, to protect them.

Once the sheep were in their cave or pen for the night, obviously the place most vulnerable to attack by wild animals or thieves was the entrance, and the shepherd didn’t push off home at night; he stayed with the sheep and lay down in the entrance. This is why Jesus says

in verses 7 and 9 of the gospel reading: "I am the gate for the sheep." The shepherd became the gate at night.

So Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," a shepherd who wants the good of the sheep. And he contrasts himself with robbers out to steal the sheep, and with hired hands who won't care about the sheep but will just save their own hide if there's a problem. The worthwhile or good shepherd knows each animal, cares for each one, looks for them if they get lost, tries to heal them if they get sick, helps them at lambing time, and risks his life to protect them. Jesus gave up his life to enable us to be God's: loved, sheltered and protected from evil.

But we've got to be careful with all this. Jesus is not promising Christians a nice, easy life, wallowing in green grass and protected from anything unpleasant. It's a rough world out there, as we know. For sheep in Israel there's very little grass or water, just barren, stony hillsides most of the time. This life is tough for us whether we are Christians or not: health issues, family problems, job and money worries, etc etc. And Jesus talks about the sheep being attacked too: by thieves and wild animals, and the danger of poor-class shepherd boys who couldn't care less and desert their jobs. Again, all sorts of things can easily hurt us - and often do.

We must be careful not to make ourselves, and what we want the focus of everything. The sheep are there for the shepherd, not the other way round; we are wrong if we think God is there for our benefit. And God is not there to cosset or pamper us. Nor does He turn us into pets; He doesn't keep us in a cosy pen with water troughs and fresh grass there for us all day long. He wants to lead us out into the world.

So what's this parable mean? It means that if we have asked God to come into our lives - to be our shepherd - He will look after our needs and guide us through this tough life. It means we'll have the joy and comfort of knowing him with us and protecting us, especially in very difficult times. It means, too, that the really tough times don't happen because He's not around or hasn't noticed or doesn't care or isn't strong enough to do anything. They are part of his plan and He'll get through them with us and bring us out the other side. That's the Good

Shepherd I think I've known and seen working in my life for nearly 40 years now.

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