

The Good Shepherd

Phillip Keller's book, *'Lessons from a Sheepdog,'*¹ published 30 years ago, is a simple yet fascinating book. Through a blossoming partnership between sheepdog and shepherd, Phillip Keller discovers what it means to follow Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. Through the captivating story of his experience with "Lass", his beloved border collie, the author shows that only as Christians submit to the loving discipline of the Shepherd do they become responsive to his love and discover fulfilment.

By lesson six "it has become obvious to the reader", Keller writes, "that the mutual love and affection which has been established between Lass and myself was very precious to both of us. "It seemed to me, at time, that our intimate relationship was much more than merely a man and a dog, more than shepherd and his sheepdog, more even than efficient co-workers. We had become special friends – a triad of triumph between master, friend and flock!"

In the verse following this morning's gospel (John 10:11) Jesus says: 'I am the Good Shepherd' and in verse 14 he says: 'I am the Good Shepherd, I know my sheep and my sheep know me'.

A mother was asked by a census-taker how many children she had. She replied, "Well, there's Billy and Harry and Martha and...". "Never mind the names," the man interrupted, "Just give me the numbers". The mother angrily replied, "They don't have numbers, they have names!" We are often reduced to numbers and statistics – passport, NHS, National Insurance number, credit card and bank account numbers, mobile or telephone numbers, post code, driving licence number and car registration numbers. Numbers identify us in almost all of our lifetime records and transactions. We are not personalities but numbers. Our opinions are even recorded, by numbers, in endless survey results. No wonder many of us have an "identity crisis".

Those that know Jesus, know that we are not a number. The story of the lost sheep demonstrates this. And Jesus says, in John 10:11 'I know my sheep and they know me. He knows each of us by our names, just like a shepherd knows each one of the sheep in his flock. Personal names and identities are important to God. After all, he is the Good Shepherd. And in John's Gospel, Jesus, says "I call you my friends, you did not choose me, I chose you." Like the shepherd going out deliberately to find the lost sheep, God finds us and invites us to be his friend. That is a tremendous privilege. We need never feel like a small cog in an oversized wheel. Genuine friendship offers each person a place where it is safe to risk disclosure about the most intimate things. Real friends go to great lengths to comfort even after they have experienced the brokenness and hollowness of shattered dreams, destroyed hopes, friends through failure as well as success. Jesus offers that friendship which is genuine, constant and consistent, the friend of everyone and specially the ones who have strayed, us sinners and it is in this context he tells the parable of the lost sheep and the Good Shepherd.

None of us does, or can exist in isolation, even on the simplest levels. We are part of a greater scheme of things, pieces in a wider jigsaw puzzle, with each piece important in its own right, the uninteresting and difficult sky pieces as much as the vibrantly coloured focal pieces. Leave a piece out and the puzzle is incomplete.

¹ Phillip Keller: *Lessons From a Sheepdog* 1983

Jesus is The Good Shepherd to everyone. "I call you friends...you did not choose me, I chose you." God, in his grace, approaches us to be a friend, an offer made out of his love.

In preparing for my Easter sermon I read one of Tony Campolo's true stories, from his book, *'Let me tell you a Story'*² about a new American recruit who was training to become a marine. He was a young man who, because of his nature and mannerisms, easily became the subject of ridicule for those who enjoy picking on people. In his assigned barracks there was a high level of meanness. The other men did everything they could to make a joke of the new recruit and humiliate him. One day, they decided to scare the living daylights out of the young marine by dropping a disarmed hand grenade onto the floor and pretending it was about to go off. Everyone knew about it, they were ready to get a big laugh. The hand grenade was thrown into the middle of the floor and the warning was yelled: "It's a live grenade, it's a live grenade. Its about to explode!" They fully expected the young man would get hysterical and perhaps jump out of a window. Instead the young marine fell on the grenade, hugged it to his stomach and yelled to the other men in the barracks, "Run! Get out quick! It's going to go off! Everyone froze in silence and shame realising that the one they had mocked was ready to die for them.

Jesus, in the same verse, says: 'the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep' and in v14: 'I am the good shepherd, I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep.'

Jesus, in describing his shepherding as "good", uses the Greek word kalos—which means "good" not in a moral or ethical sense, but in the Platonic sense of a model of perfection. Jesus was presenting himself as THE real, THE model shepherd, both for our everyday and eternal lives. It is not the point that the hired hand is the bad and Jesus is the Good Shepherd. It is that Jesus is the real and model shepherd, the only one who knows his sheep and is willing to die for them. John is the only Gospel that speaks of Jesus' death in terms of laying down his life. This image of Jesus the shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep is repeated three times within seven verses, in verses 11, 15, and 17. Jesus, in John 15:13, uses this same language again when he calls his followers "friends." The greatest act of love is "to lay down one's life for one's friends." This act distinguishes the Good Shepherd from imposters.

Phillip Keller write that as the years went by at "Fairwinds" Farm he saw in ever increasing clarity what Jesus meant when He spoke so often of His love for us and our love for him. He began to understand a little the true implications and demands of a "laid down life". Continuously, Keller adds he was giving himself for Lass his sheepdog – his strength, attention, affection, care, loyalty, friendship his very life. In turn she reciprocated this outpouring by giving back her vitality, her vigour, her enthusiasm, her spontaneous co-operation, her love, her loyalty. Together all the benefits of this amazing relationship were then poured out upon the flock.

Interestingly, I browsed through Gerard Hughes' book *'God in All Things'*³ again, the other day and picked up on one of his visual aid he uses, to explain discernment. It

² Tony Campolo: *Let Me Tell You a Story* 2000

³ Gerard Hughes: *God in All Things* 2003

was based on *'One Man and His Dog'*, a TV programme. The shepherd works with his sheepdog, in a competition, to round up a small flock of sheep into a pen. The winner is the most effective and quickest in doing so. Hughes writes that the shepherd may be a fine upstanding person, the dog a champion, but if the two fail to relate well the operation will fail. But that is not the point of Hughes' visual aid. He says that the TV programme reflects aspects of the inner life of each human being. As in so many biblical passages, the shepherd symbolises God; the sheep dog represents our deepest desire. And the sheep! They are the desires within us that are not our deepest desire – those aspects of us revealed when more superficial desires take over: greed, ambition and vanity; the desire to be accepted and promoted, the desire to control, possess, dominate, the desire to save one's skin at all costs! The 'sheep' superficial desires are usually loudest and most consistent within our consciousness. Our 'sheepdog' deepest desires lie dormant much of the time and only break through into our consciousness when superficial desires have taken control and force us into action.

And Keller writes that the relationship Christ desires of us is bound to be one of the most profound and passionate longings of His love for us. "More than anything else in the world," he writes, "He wants me to be His companion, His co-worker, His friend in helping tend His flock." In effect then we are called to help the Good Shepherd.

George Carey wrote once ⁴, when Bishop of Bath and Wells, that he took a confirmation service at King's School Taunton. "It was a hot morning and there were 68 candidates. Things went wrong and I was not a happy man. Parents looked as lively as cod in a fishmonger's shop. It was awful. But during the reception a man came up to me with his granddaughter who had been confirmed and said "Bishop, this morning you brought me back home. The last time I was in church was years ago. But I found the service and your message so helpful that I made my communion and decided to follow Christ again" In reality, the former Archbishop writes, that service WAS awful, it was really bad. Yet God used it. He used it and me, that hot morning"

Carey concluded that that's the point about God's grace. And we can say that is the point of the story of the Good Shepherd. Jesus, The Good Shepherd, willing to lay down his life for his flock brings us into an intimate friendship with God, which, if we let him, God WILL use to spread his word in the most amazing and incredible ways.

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⁴ George Carey: *I Believe* 1991