

Address on 20th September 2020 – The ‘I am’ sayings of Jesus

John 10:11-21 I am the Good Shepherd

Introduction

Naomi and I recently spent a week walking in the Lake District. It is probably our favourite part of the country and we try to go there at least once a year to climb the hills and take in the wonderful views. Occasionally as we are walking across the fells, we will see a farmer out with his sheepdogs, whistling commands, and very often in his hand he will be carrying a traditional shepherd’s crook.

It is not just shepherds that carry crooks. Bishops have them too. When I went to the enthronement service of the Bishop of Winchester, back in 2012, he was presented as part of that service with a bishop’s staff. It may have been more ornate than the usual shepherd’s crook but that was what it was.

Why would a bishop carry a crook? Because he is called to look after God’s flock. It is a symbol of his calling to care for God’s people. In fact, this is the calling of all the clergy though we don’t all carry crooks. We are often referred to, however, as ‘pastor’, which is the Latin word for shepherd.

The life of a shepherd

What do you suppose the life of a shepherd was like in Jesus’ day?

In our passage in John’s gospel, Jesus speaks about the wolf coming to attack the sheep. It must have been a dangerous job at times. The young David, when he is speaking to King Saul before his fight with Goliath, tells the king that while he was tending his father’s sheep, he had to fight off lions and bears. He had to put his life on the line for his sheep. Reading that story again reminded me of my time in Africa and how relatively small children would be sent out with the herds to drive them to pasture and to keep an eye on them until it was time to bring them home again in the evening.

The life of a shepherd was almost certainly lonely at times. Shepherds often spent long hours with their sheep, maybe days on end out in the hills. It was to such shepherds that the angels first brought the news of Jesus’ birth.

When Jesus says, ‘I am the good shepherd’, what does he mean?

The shepherd guides

One role of the shepherd was to guide the sheep. This is picked up in Psalm 23. David writes, ‘the Lord is my shepherd, he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters.’ We tend to picture a shepherd driving the sheep, using his dogs to keep them under control and to move them forward. In the holy land, however, shepherds often walked in front of their sheep and the sheep followed.

If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, how does he guide us?

One way, and we spoke about this last week, is through the Bible. It is as we read our Bibles that we see more and more God’s will for our world and for our own lives.

God also guides us through prayer. As we spend time with him and open ourselves to him, our wills become more aligned with his.

He also guides us through others. Years ago I worked as a curate for Richard Thomson. When he was a young clergyman he had a lady in his congregation called Jackie Pullinger. She believed that God was calling her to something, but she didn't know what it was. Richard told her to buy a 'round the world' ticket on a ship and to get off when God told her to. That place turned out to be Hong Kong and she spent her life in an amazing ministry with drug addicts in that city. You may have read her book, 'Chasing the dragon'.

The shepherd protects

Another aspect of being a shepherd was to defend and protect the sheep. What does that mean in the context of Jesus? It can't mean that bad things will never happen to us. That isn't how the world is. We are not cocooned when we become Christians. But he will protect us from the evil one if we stick close to him. It is the devil, says St Paul, who prowls around like a lion wanting to devour us and knock us off track.

The shepherd rescues his sheep

One of the jobs of the shepherd is to rescue the sheep when they are lost or in danger. The crook is designed to hook around them and pull them back into the fold. And Jesus came to rescue us. Three times in our passage he talks about laying down his life for the sheep.

At the heart of the gospel is the problem of sin. 'We all like sheep have gone astray,' the Bible says, 'each of us to his own devices.' Sin is turning our backs on God, going our own way, doing our own thing, putting 'I' in the middle. The word sin has an 'I' in the middle. And the problem with sin is that it separates us from God. We create a barrier.

Jesus came to deal with that barrier by dying for us. The Good Shepherd laid down his life, that we might be put right with God. Jesus gave his life that we might be saved.

Other sheep who are not of this fold

What did Jesus mean when he said he had other sheep to gather in who were not of the same fold? It is widely understood that he was speaking about the gentiles. The Jews thought that they were specially chosen by God, and they were though not in the way they thought. God chose the Jews to be a 'light to the nations', to take the message of God to all the nations, to be a beacon of hope. Sadly, they failed and so God sent Jesus. In this passage as he addresses a Jewish crowd, Jesus wants them to know that God's salvation is for all men and women, irrespective of whether they are Jewish or not.

Summary

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He wants to be our shepherd. He has died for us to rescue us from sin and death. He wants to guide us and protect us.

Prayer

Jesus, Lord, we give you thanks that you are the Good Shepherd who has rescued us from sin. Guide us we pray and help us to stick close to you through thick and thin and to follow you day by day. **Amen**

Rev'd Anthony Smith