

JOHN 10:11-18
ST JOHN'S, 22.4.18, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

If you drive anywhere in the country at the moment, you'll see fields of sheep with their lambs. I love watching lambs playing, chasing each other round, jumping for the sheer joy of life. Like most people, I say, "Ah - aren't they *cute*?!"

When most of us think of shepherds, we probably have a very romantic view of their work, because we think of cute, cuddly lambs. We forget that when lambs grow into sheep, they stop being cute and cuddly.

When we read the Bible, we also forget that sheep in the Middle East don't grow fat and woolly in lush green fields. Sheep live in the desert, where there's hardly any grass. The shepherd has to lead them around to find food and water. Even in 21st century Wales being a shepherd is hard work. In the Middle East, it's hard, tiring and sometimes dangerous. Before David went out to fight Goliath, he told King Saul that he'd had to kill both lions and bears when he was keeping his father's sheep.

When Jesus uses the picture of a shepherd with his sheep to talk about his relationship with his followers, the people listening to him would have understood immediately. There are various passages in the OT, where the religious leaders are described as shepherds, and the people of Israel as God's flock. And in Ezekiel 34:23, God promises: *I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and*

he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd. In our passage this morning, Jesus is obviously claiming to fulfil that prophecy.

I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Jesus calls himself *the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep.* As I said, being a shepherd could be dangerous; for David, defending his sheep from danger meant taking on lions and bears, and killing them. But although a good shepherd would be willing to risk his life for his sheep, he wouldn't *intend* to die. If he died, he'd leave his sheep totally exposed, and the next lion or bear or wolf to come along would have a real feast.

Like all metaphors, Jesus' picture of himself as a shepherd breaks down here. Because Jesus didn't just risk his life; as he says here, *"I lay it down of my own accord"*. Jesus chose to die, to save his people. In this passage, there's no explanation as to why Jesus had to die to save his people; there's just a contrast between Jesus 'the good shepherd', and the hired hands, who aren't prepared even to risk their lives for the sake of the sheep, let alone actually lay them down.

Jesus also says that just as he has an intimate relationship with God his Father, he also has an intimate relationship with his sheep. At the end of the passage, he talks about *other sheep . . . that are not of this fold*, and how *they will listen to my voice*. At the beginning of this chapter, Jesus says, *To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*

When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." (John 10:3-5) Jesus' sheep follow him because they know him, they recognise his voice. It doesn't matter which 'sheepfold' they're in - when they hear his voice, they come out and follow him. The first sheepfold Jesus talks about is Judaism - when he called the sheep to follow him, some came with him, and others stayed behind. The other sheepfolds are people of other nations and other faiths - when Jesus calls them, some will come and follow him, that is, they'll become Christians, while others will stay behind. All the sheep who recognise Jesus' voice and follow him will become part of one flock, with Jesus as their shepherd. This is a picture of God offering to save all the peoples of the earth. Not everyone accepts his offer, but those who do are all part of his one family, the one Church.

CONCLUSION

We have so much to thank Jesus for! He's laid down his life for us, to save us from the results of our rebellion against God. Even though we weren't in the original sheepfold of Judaism, he's still come and called us out to follow him, and to be part of his one flock. And as David says, and we've already read this morning, in Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing'.

But sheep are notoriously stupid animals. Even once we've joined Jesus' flock, so often we wander off and get lost. Maybe we get

distracted and stop listening to his voice. As members of Jesus' flock, we're meant to have that intimate relationship with him that I talked about just now, but too often we find we've lost the intimacy we once had. If you're in that situation this morning, if you can no longer hear Jesus' voice leading you on, can I challenge you to pray; ask Jesus to rescue you once again, and ask him to teach you to listen for his voice and to stay with the rest of the flock. Let's pray now.