

John 10:22-30

May 12th, 2019

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, so-named because of the Gospel reading traditionally set down for this day from John 10. It is in this chapter that we hear Jesus refer to himself as the Good Shepherd. It has been a favourite image down through the ages with strong connections to the well-loved Psalm 23.

It is a comforting and enriching image to think of the role of a shepherd who looks over his flock: protecting it, feeding it and guiding it. It is not a bad image to have on mothers' day, where the role of a mother in her care for her children is not dissimilar.

I don't want to ruin this shepherd imagery for you, but I am going to stir it up a little today. Hopefully I won't cause too many rumblings – the last thing I need is a stampeding flock!

Picture a flock of sheep grazing in rolling green pastures next to nice still waters under the watchful eye of a shepherd. It is a restful image conveying a sense of security and contentment. We can transfer this image to a congregation gathering under the care of our Good Shepherd Jesus, who nurtures us with his Word and feeds us with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

We are safe and secure and content as *'his people, the sheep of his pasture'*; as the Psalmist declares in Psalm 100.

We are right to gain comfort from this image of the shepherd and his sheep. But there is a far more challenging and confronting aspect to this imagery that doesn't get the same attention.

We are happy for our Good Shepherd to feed us, care for us and protect us. Are we as happy for him to lead us? Our instinctive response is to say, *'of course we are'!*

Maybe we are if the destination happens to be the next landscape of green pastures and still waters. But what about when the scene happens to be the valley of the shadow of death? What about when the path our Shepherd leads us on is to the abattoir, to a place of sacrifice and suffering, even death?

Think about it. Sheep are not generally pets, are they? You don't have a flock of sheep for aesthetic purposes or plonk them in a paddock to munch grass and produce methane. They provide for us. They provide wool, which means they need to be shorn – an inconvenience for a sheep, I imagine, but no big deal.

But they also provide meat. I like my lamb chops and roast. So the green pastures and still waters serve to fatten them up nicely for market. I imagine this offering from a sheep is going to be a touch more inconvenient to its overall well-being.

The imagery is not so comfortable or romantic anymore, is it!

And if this alters your opinion of the Good Shepherd (how dare he set up his sheep in this way), then you need to remember that he is both the Shepherd and the Lamb. Jesus is the Lamb who was led to the slaughter, the Lamb who was slain.

That means the Shepherd we follow is not always going to lead us to green pastures and still waters. He is also going to lead us to dark places and troubled waters. The Shepherd from the 23rd Psalm did not promise to lead his people **around** the valley of the shadow of death. He promised to lead them **through** it.

The role of a mother is not simply to **protect** her child from the world, as much as this is her instinct. Her role is to **prepare** her child for the world. Our Good Shepherd doesn't tuck us in a pasture **away** from the world. He prepares us **for** the world.

Our Shepherd will lead us into a hostile, broken, hurting world – because that is where our world needs us to be. That is where Jesus himself is to be found. That is what Jesus did when he became flesh to make his dwelling among us.

We see his intent when it comes to the location where he shared this imagery. I would have thought an appropriate location would have been at the Sermon on the Mount to a crowd of willing listeners – or maybe at the scene of the feeding of the 5,000.

More appropriate still would have been in the context of a meal with his nearest and dearest: the Lord's Supper would have been the most appropriate, I would have thought.

But God's thoughts are not my thoughts and his ways are not my ways. Jesus didn't choose any of these locations or occasions. He chose to share this imagery whilst in the temple complex at Jerusalem, at the heart of where opposition to him was fiercest.

And his primary audience was not his nearest and dearest. It was to: *'The Jews who were there gathered around him'*. The word used here for 'gather' has an undertone of hostility. It is used to describe an army that encircles a town in order to lay siege to it.

The enemies of Jesus were circling and moving in for the kill: something they would achieve in the not too distant future.

I would have thought that you would try and avoid such people. It is a much safer way to go, a much better way to increase your life expectancy and protect it. But again, this is not about my thoughts: it's about the thoughts and ways of our Good Shepherd.

Jesus chooses to be right there in the thick of it. He shares with those who are antagonistic toward him some precious insights into his relationship with the heavenly Father. He shares with them his identity as the Good Shepherd who seeks to gather all people to himself and under the protection of God's kingdom.

We didn't hear their response in the verses we had today, but in the verse following our reading, we're told '*his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him*' (10:31). I'd suggest that was not an especially favourable response! Nor was it a particularly surprising one, given his recent history with the Jewish authorities.

So why would Jesus place himself in that position, knowing how it would end? And why would Jesus send us into similar situations, knowing we will face opposition, even persecution? Is this the Shepherd we want to follow? Is this the Shepherd we will follow?

I hope so. Because we know why Jesus placed himself in harm's way, don't we? He did it to lay down his life for his sheep.

And who are his sheep? Is it only those who have already heard his voice and listened to him? Is it only those who gather within the security of the four walls of a church in worship?

We know it's not. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. That included those who were circling him. The Jewish leaders were not unanimous in their opposition to Jesus. Some were saying he was demon-possessed and raving mad and others responded: '*Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?*' (10:19-21).

They were wrestling with the identity of Jesus: "*How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.*"

Jesus placed himself in a position where they could hear his voice and either accept him or reject him. It was a risky venture and we know the outcome. Those same Jewish leaders would soon be gathered around the foot of the cross at Golgotha. Plenty were there to ridicule him. But there were at least two of them, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who were there to honour him.

Our world continues to wrestle with the truth and continues to wrestle with the place of God in that truth. A growing number have excluded God from their lives and see no need for Jesus. These people are not all faceless strangers out there – many are much closer to home. Many are our own flesh and blood.

Would you want Jesus to go to them? Would you want Jesus to send his sheep to them: to your children or grandchildren? Of course you would, even if your loved ones may end up ridiculing and rejecting those who are sent. You want them sent because there is a chance they may hear the voice of the Good Shepherd through these sent ones and come to know the life he brings.

We don't come to worship to escape the troubles of the world. We come here so we are better equipped to face them. Jesus doesn't gather us to keep us safe from a world that can harm us but to prepare us so we can be sent to a world that needs us.

We gather in worship and we engage with God's Word so we can hear the voice of our Shepherd and understand where he might be leading us to make his voice heard. He will lead us to familiar faces and unfamiliar alike, to the receptive and unreceptive alike.

Will we listen to the voice of our Shepherd and will we follow him wherever he leads? It may be to dark places and troubled waters. It may be to situations where we feel like we are being circled and under siege. But even there we need fear no evil: *'for you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me'*.

Our Shepherd, Jesus, doesn't promise that our journey will be easy. But he does promise: *"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand"*.

With that assurance may we go and bring God's light, life and hope to our broken and hurting world. Our world needs to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd and he calls us to share it. Amen.

Rev Stephen Schultz
Assist Bishop for Mission
SA & NT LCA