

Sermon on John 10, 11-18

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Over 40 years ago, as part of one of the Christmas services here in St. Augustine's, a nativity play was put on. The youngest were cast as sheep. That was my first part in a church service. So it seems apt for me to be returning to St. Augustine's on Good Shepherd Sunday - thank you, Chris, for inviting me to preach!

Sheep and shepherds are among the oldest images in the Bible, reaching way back into Old Testament times. For example, Moses and David both had stints herding sheep. And in psalm 23 we just heard how, in an ancient prayer, the image of the shepherd is used as a metaphor for God's caring for his people. Fast forward hundreds of years from David's prayer - to the early church: When the followers of Christ started painting, one of the first pictures that keeps recurring is - not the cross! - but Christ as the good shepherd.

In our reading from the Gospel of John for this morning, we see what inspired these artists of the early church: Jesus boldly states that he is The Good Shepherd. "The one and only" good shepherd. That's a pretty steep claim. What makes this shepherd good? Why is he trustworthy and capable of looking after those in his flock? Or, to put it differently: Why would you or I be wise to let ourselves be shepherded by Jesus?

In this passage from his Gospel, John turns our attention to different aspects of Jesus and what it means for him to be the good shepherd. I want to focus on three qualities this morning: devotion - knowledge - and power. Each of these is important on its own, but -

like in a musical chord - it is only in combination that the three give us a full sense of what Jesus means by being the good shepherd.

First, devotion. Sheep are frisky and likely to wander off, getting themselves into all sorts of tight spots that they can't escape from. And this passage from John makes clear: There is danger from the outside, too: Wild animals that feed on sheep. Let's not forget one aspect of the shepherd-and-sheep metaphor: Sheep are completely defenseless animals. They have no menacing claws or teeth and they are neither fast nor strong in comparison with their predators. So they need someone to look after them: someone who will keep an eagle eye out, someone who is willing to defend them, should they be attacked. This is not a glamorous job, but it's bitterly needed. And it is dangerous: As a shepherd defending your sheep you may end up being wounded yourself. Being a shepherd doesn't come cheap.

Jesus makes clear here that he is not only up for this job, aware that there is some risk. No, he emphasises that he knows the cost is actually much worse than we might have feared: In 8 short verses we hear one phrase repeated five times! It's the phrase: to lay down one's life for the sheep. There's no doubt that this is front and centre in what Jesus is saying here: I lay down my life for the sheep. - Isn't that a bit exaggerated? I mean, ok, if a shepherd is any good, surely he would defend his sheep, up to a point. It's his livelihood that's at stake, after all. Maybe his arm might get bitten by a wolf, or he might break his leg falling down. But surely there comes a point when the fight is just not worth the extra cost: you've got to save your own skin, after all; when push comes to shove, the shepherd is worth more than the sheep, isn't he?!

And so it gets really interesting when we can sense that this shepherd-and-sheep metaphor breaks down: Jesus as the good shepherd is saying: I'm in this wholeheartedly, I'm completely devoted to these sheep that are in my care. When it comes to my flock, I'll go all the way to stand in the way of danger.

Just recently - on Good Friday - we have been reminded that these words were not just hot air. When push actually came to shove, Jesus was willing to stand in the way of danger, to absorb the hatred and the violence that was unleashed by others, rather than passing them on, or retaliating, as we usually do. - For violence to end, someone has to be willing to stop the seemingly endless cycle of attack and counter-attack. And one of the things that Good Friday shows us is that Jesus - and in him God himself - was willing to do just that. Even at the cost of Jesus's own life.

So, devotion is central to the Good Shepherd. But devotion on its own is not enough. To be a good shepherd, you have to have the power, the means of actually helping your sheep.

Let's look then at power. In all his talk about laying down his life for the sheep, Jesus is very clear about one thing: Nobody is going to force him into this. He says "No one takes it (my life) from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again." This kind of talk does not sound like a weakling, an underdog, speaking, does it?

The word used here for power in the Greek is *exousia*. It can mean power in the sense of freedom to choose, authority, government, as well as physical or mental strength. So Jesus is saying here that he has the authority, the strength, the freedom to lay down his life for his flock and to take it up again.

Who can really, seriously make the second claim that Jesus makes here? “I have power to take it (my life) up again” he says. This probably sounded like nonsense to his listeners at the time, or like megalomania. But with the benefit of hindsight, looking back from our vantage point this Easter season in 2018, the empty grave and Jesus’s resurrection are essential to how we understand Jesus and the issue of power: Easter is the event that underscores the trustworthiness of all he said and did before he died. His resurrection is the sign and seal that back up Jesus’s claims, including his claim to be the good shepherd. - If he had the power to come back from the dead, then we can trust him to have the power to shepherd us even through the worst that this life can throw at us, through mental and physical pain, even through death itself - into his kind of new life.

So, devotion and power are key to being the good shepherd. But what about knowledge, the third aspect of being the good shepherd that I mentioned? Right in the middle of the passage from John’s Gospel Jesus makes this central statement: “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.”

To know. The verb is repeated four times here. We get the point: Knowing is key. But knowing can mean different things, can’t it. “I know my own”, Jesus says. - The UK sheep breeders association has a website headed “Know your sheep”. You can get plenty of information there; it’ll help you distinguish Herdwick sheep from black Welsh mountain sheep, for example. - There is a place for snippets of information gleaned from the web like this, isn’t there - but where would we be, if that was all we meant when we used the word “know”? Just think how you would feel if your sibling or your

spouse was asked whether they knew you, and all they could say was “Oh, yes, I know her. She’s about 1 metre 60 tall. She’s got blue eyes and blonde hair”. That may be correct, but wouldn’t you have hoped that they knew you better than that?

Moving this question of knowledge to another level: If someone is going to be able to shepherd you or me through the ups and downs of our lives, they would need real insight into each of us as individuals, our needs and the issues we face. Who has deep knowledge about us, and about how this world really works?

When the resurrected Jesus is willing to let Thomas touch him, he shows just how well he knows our questions. And when the resurrected Jesus serves a lakeside breakfast to some of his disciples, he knows that sometimes what we really need to comfort us is a shared meal. When the resurrected Jesus asks Peter whether he loves him, Jesus knows that Peter himself needs to hear his own answer: “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you”. And when Jesus calls out “Mary!” to Mary of Magdala who is crying outside the empty tomb, he knows that speaking her name in his voice will reveal to her who he really is: the resurrected Christ.

In-depth, intimate knowledge of the sheep, each individual part of the flock. That is essential to what makes Jesus the good shepherd.

And again we are invited to pay particular attention to where the shepherd-and-sheep metaphor breaks down: Jesus says “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.” What an incredible comparison! A little later in John’s Gospel Jesus says “I and the Father are one”. If you are one, you know every part of the other - there is nothing hidden - - you share all things.

Amazingly, it is into this life of the tri-une God that the risen Christ is calling each of us this morning. By using the metaphor of the good shepherd, he's telling us that we can trust his devotion, his power and his knowledge. And he is inviting us get to know him more and more: in his words and the stories from his life, in the faces around us in his flock - and at his table later on at the Eucharist.