

We have moved onto the third Sunday after Easter and the theme for our meditation is, "The Good Shepherd." When we think of a shepherd, we are always reminded of the care that is given by them for their sheep. Shepherds usually go either ahead of the flock leading them, or behind the flock defending them. They carry a shepherd's staff with them to defend the sheep from various attacks of wild animals. Shepherds are usually devoted to their sheep and tend to give them all nick names so that they can identify them. In John's gospel Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd." This is one of the seven 'I am' sayings in St. John's gospel. In the same section Jesus also claims that he is the gate for the sheep. By identifying himself as the Good Shepherd he is indicating that there are other shepherds who are not good. This morning I would like us to look at the characteristics of a Good Shepherd.

A good shepherd is one who protects his sheep. Thieves and robbers are always out to attack the sheep and to kill them. The shepherd always enters through the main door and the sheep immediately recognise him. Jesus' opponents thought of themselves as the legitimate shepherds of God's people. However, as seen in the previous chapter of the healing of a blind man, Jesus shows that the Jewish leadership was blind and unreceptive to the words of Jesus. They were neither good shepherds nor God's sheep. They did not even understand what Jesus was telling them.

Jesus says that the Good Shepherd calls his sheep by name and leads them out. The sheep hear his voice and follow him. Jesus is saying that obedience to the Word of God is necessary. It is the way to life. Jesus also says that they are his own sheep. There is a sense of belonging that God is the owner. The good shepherd also knows his sheep by name. Names are important as they give identity to a person. When someone calls us by name we feel good because we know that the person has recognised us. I personally struggle to remember names and sometimes ask a person over and over for their names. However, Jesus is not like that, and he calls us by name. Even in the resurrection appearance he addressed Mary by name. When he raised Lazarus from the dead he called him by name.

Jesus says that he has come that we may have life and have it abundantly. That is the promise that Jesus gives us. Abundant life is a life filled with purpose, a life which is content in God no matter how rough the external circumstances may be. We are called to taste of this life abundant both here and in the world to come.

Jesus also tells us that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus sets us the example of what it means to love. The appeal to Christ's self-sacrifice leads to an appeal to practice love which goes beyond feelings to costly sharing of one's possessions with the needy. Jesus says that he knows his sheep and his sheep know him. In other words, there is a mutual relationship. He reminds us that there are other sheep that do not belong to his pen which he must bring in also. They too will listen to his voice and there will be one flock and one shepherd. Jesus tells his disciples that he was laying down his life on his own accord and he had the right to take it up again.

This morning the Good Shepherd calls each one of us by name. We are to respond to his voice so that we may have life and life abundant. The Good Shepherd Jesus Christ has laid down his life for us on the cross, but he rose again on the third day. He wants us to be part of his sheep pen. May we truly be his sheep, obedient to his voice and following him so that we may have life eternal.