

SUNDAY 12 JULY 2020

JESUS: IN HIS OWN WORDS

'I am the good shepherd'

*Lord I come to your awesome presence,
from the shadows into your radiance.
Search me, try me, consume all my darkness.*

Given our theme this morning, it is appropriate to come into God's presence and to praise him in the words of Psalm 23.

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

According to Ezekiel 34:11–16, God, the good shepherd cares for the sheep, rescuing them from the places to which they have been scattered, feeding them, and tending to the weak, the injured, and the lost. By proclaiming himself the good shepherd Jesus identifies himself as fulfilling God's promises and doing God's work.

¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep." (John 10:14f)

The word 'good' here means proper, true, fulfilling its purpose. When God saw what he had created he proclaimed it *good*, it fulfilled his intentions. God promised his people a *good* land to inhabit (Exodus 3:8; Deuteronomy 1:25) and gave them the law that is *good* (Psalm 119:39; Romans 7:12). Jesus said that the seed in the *good* soil yields grains thirty-, sixty-, and hundredfold (Mark 4:8), and he is the *good* shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

Once again, the focus here is on Jesus, who he is and what his work involves. He fulfils the description in Ezekiel 34, even to the extent of giving his life for the sheep. Jesus is revealing more of his self-understanding. We can add this to his description of himself as bread and light.

What is particularly important here is that Jesus speaks of himself in relationship, firstly to his father, who knows and approves of what Jesus is doing (this is the point that offends some of those listening), and secondly to his 'sheep'. A shepherd is only a shepherd as long as he has sheep to tend. Jesus' sheep are his followers, you and me. Jesus is active on our behalf, rescuing us when we are scattered or lost, feeding us when we are hungry or thirsty, and tending us when we are weak or injured.

We pause and pray for those known to us this morning who need the loving attention of the good shepherd.

Pause and pray

Although this passage focuses on Jesus, it does raise questions about ourselves. What does it mean for us to live as Jesus' sheep? What does a church that understands itself as Jesus' sheep look like? How will our identity be shown in the world? Jesus the good shepherd chose to make himself known to the world through his death. These verses call us, individually and collectively, to live out our life according to the model of community envisioned by Jesus, a model grounded in love and in our mutual relationship as Jesus' sheep.

²⁰ Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹ make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. (Hebrews 13:20f)

*In all my thoughts, may I think of you;
In all my words, may I speak of you;
In all my actions, may I act as you;
In all my interactions, may I love like you;
In everything, may I look like you,
More and more each day.
Amen.*