

25 April 2021

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Nanda Groenewald

Reading: John 10:11-18

The Lord is my shepherd.

The 23rd Psalm was the very first passage I could read from the Bible, as I'm sure might be the case for many of you too. It's probably the best known and most loved Scripture passage in all the world.

It's a metaphor, of course: Jesus is compared to a shepherd. And not just any shepherd...

In John 10 Jesus says: I am the Good Shepherd. This is one of his famous "I am"-statements, an explanation of who he was and what he came to do. The others are:

"I am...

...the bread of life;

...the light of the world;

...the door;

...the resurrection and the life;

...the way, the truth and the life;

...the true vine."

But let's have a wee look at what it meant to be a shepherd:

In Biblical times being a shepherd was all but a romantic or sought-after job. In actual fact, many people looked down on shepherds.

Jesus could have chosen absolutely anything to compare himself with, but in the passage we read together this morning – he chose a shepherd.

And I think that says a lot about the nature of our God. He could have said: I am the CEO, or the manager, the founder, the owner, the leader, the king... of all people (which would have been true in every instance), but he chooses to compare himself to a lowly shepherd.

And that's another thing about Jesus – he always made use of images that the people of his time could understand well, and as the majority of society were peasants and for many of them having sheep was their sole source of income, this was something absolutely everybody would be able to understand.

Being a shepherd was a full-time job. During the day, a shepherd took his sheep out to find pastures and water, so they could eat and drink, and during the night he would take them back home where they would sleep in the sheepfold, usually a stone wall attached to a house, where the shepherd himself would sleep at the entrance, to make sure that his sheep were safe.

'Laying down', and 'taking up' were what a shepherd did every day. And this of course is exactly what Jesus did for us on the cross as well...

In our passage we heard that a hired hand is not the same as the actual shepherd, because he would probably only take care of the sheep because he needed the payment for the job. For him it wasn't about the *sheep*, but about his own well-being. Which meant that if the sheep were in danger – if a wolf came, for instance – he would run away, more concerned about his own safety than about that of the sheep.

But not a true shepherd. He would stay and fight, he would do what needed to be done to keep his sheep safe. The wellbeing of the sheep would be more important to him than his own wellbeing.

And now you can probably understand why Jesus chose this metaphor – because that is exactly what happened when he died on the cross. He gave *his* life, to save *ours*.

Today, our lives look different, and it's mainly farmers who take care of sheep on their farms today. I often see farmers on quadbikes and sheepdogs do the herding. If a sheep wanders off and ends up on the wrong side of the fence, you'll see it on community Facebook pages, notifying the farmer so he can take it back to safety. Sheep will be marked, so there will be no question as to who they belong to.

So, it might be in a different way, but sheep are part of our lives too here in Scotland.

Before we moved here, the picture I had in my head of Scotland, was one of green hills with sheep dotted all over. And I must say – I was right! Every time I look over the fields and see the sheep I thank God for allowing us to live in this amazingly beautiful country!

And when Lorna said we are welcome to go to the farm to make a Kid's Kirk clip about the lambs, we were super excited. So much so that my silly husband got inside the pen and picked up one of the lambs. Let me show you the part of the Kids Clip I had to cut out – just to give you a wee laugh! (*Video clip*)

Very often we will refer to sheep as dumb animals.

So much so, that when I went to visit someone in our church for the 1st time, she said: “Nanda, please just take a note of this – if you ever conduct my funeral, don't read the 23rd Psalm, because I am NOT a sheep!” But then, probably a couple of years later, I had a sermon about Isaiah 14 (the passage André and I used for Kids Kirk today), in which God says that he carries the lambs close to his heart. After this she said: “Maybe it's not that bad to be compared to a sheep after all... That is, when God is the Shepherd!”

Day to day God gives us what we need. He takes care of us and loves us.

And there is a lesson in here for us – because what we really need in life, we cannot get by ourselves – God needs to lead us there, to give it to us, and that is the security of knowing that we belong.

If we wander off ourselves to try and find what we think we need without his protection, it's then that we can run into trouble.

And the next lesson is that we are part of a flock. In a positive way. Because we can look out for each other, support each other, and there

is always safety in numbers. A lone sheep is a much easier target for a wolf than a whole flock, guarded by their shepherd.

And in this life there are so many wolves... Other people trying to lead us astray, trying to convince us that we don't need God; worries; uncertainty; disasters; illness; global pandemics – situations beyond our control that can easily break us if we have to face it alone. But with the support of our Shepherd, and each other, we'll always be able to get through it.

Community is so important. Relationships make us feel cared for. And that is something we all probably took for granted before Covid19 struck, and something that we will value more than ever now.

And this brings me to a very important question: How different would our society be if the focus was on the *quality* of relationships, rather than on personal achievements?

Let's take care of each other, because God takes care of us first. Jesus doesn't abandon us when things get tough – he is faithful, and in control. Let's never turn our backs on him, because without him, we will be lost.

God knows each of us by name. Let's make sure that we know him well enough to be able to recognise his voice when he speaks to us.

There is a story told about a Shakespearean actor who was known everywhere for his one-man shows of readings and recitations from the classics.

He would always end his performance with a dramatic reading of Psalm 23.

Each night, without exception, as the actor began his recitation: “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...” The crowd would listen attentively. And then, at the conclusion of the Psalm, they would rise in thunderous applause in appreciation of the actor's incredible ability to bring the verse to life.

But one night, just before the actor was to offer his customary recital of Psalm 23, a young man from the audience spoke up. “Sir, do you mind if tonight I recite Psalm 23?” The actor was quite taken back by this unusual request, but he allowed the young man to come forward and stand front and centre on the stage to recite the Psalm, knowing that the ability of this unskilled youth would be no match for his own talent.

With a soft voice, the young man began to recite the words of the Psalm. When he was finished, there was no applause. There was no standing ovation as on other nights. All that could be heard was the sound of weeping.

The audience had been so moved by the young man's recitation that every eye was full of tears. Amazed by what he had heard, the actor said to the youth, “I don't understand. I have been performing Psalm 23 for years. I have a lifetime of experience and training – but I have never been able to move an audience as you have tonight. Tell me, what is your secret?”

The young man quietly replied, “Well sir, you know the Psalm... I know the Shepherd.”

Amen

Help us to follow the ‘good shepherd’.

Lord, when we feel lost and confused...

When we are tired by caring for others...

When we’re tempted by the wolves...

When we’re enjoying good pasture and rest...

Send us out to be faithful sheep and...