

## **Jn. 10-11-18**

I'm really pleased to be with you today through this recording and on behalf of the Central Baptist Association I bring warm greetings in these extraordinary times.

I have on my bookshelf facing my desk a Hummel porcelain figurine of a shepherd boy with two sheep. It was bought for me by Uncle Rev and Auntie Jean when I was probably two or three years old and so it's been a lifelong companion. As I gaze on it I often reflect that it's one shepherd looking at another shepherd as I've always viewed my ministry as a pastor or, put it another way, a shepherd.

And yet the biblical image of shepherd is easily misconstrued. Lest it be thought of romantically as rolling green hills, the shepherd with faithful dog and whistle, all accompanied by the call of the French horn at the beginning of the final movement of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, it's a far more rigorous metaphor, today, and particularly in biblical times.

When David, the song-writer king composed Psalm 23 he did so from life-experience as a shepherd. And when questioned about his credentials to take on the giant, Goliath, he replies by saying, 'Whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, and kill it.' 1 Sam. 17.3-5. Being a shepherd was a tough job, living alongside the sheep, sometimes using their own body as the gate to the fold, lying down in the entrance to keep predators at bay. It demanded a nomadic life-style constantly searching for available pasture, and as they regularly directed the flock to new pastures they led from the front, striding out ahead of the sheep. When a lion or bear did threaten the flock the shepherd was ready and equipped to fight them off. There was a grittiness about being a shepherd. It was a 24-7 job, demanding everything, made worse by the fact that they could not regularly fulfil religious duties so they became religious outcasts.

In these verses from Jn. 10 Jesus proclaims, 'I am the shepherd'. But as you know, he says more than this, 'I am the *good* shepherd' and just to drive the point home, he says it three times within eight verses.

What does it look like for Jesus to be the good shepherd? Jesus leaves us in no doubt because, as soon as he says it he goes on to say 'The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep' and he says this not once, not even three times, but five times. The Good Shepherd becomes, in the words of John the Baptist at the beginning of John's Gospel, 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world'. In the Garden of Gethsemene, on the night before he died, Jesus lays down his life by coming out of the garden, the fold, leaving his sheep protected and safe in the garden, giving himself up for the sake of his disciples, his sheep, and indeed for all of his sheep.

At the end of John's Gospel, after the resurrection, Peter, the apostle, returns from a fruitless night of fishing to encounter a stranger on the shore, none other than Jesus. And after following Jesus's instruction to throw the net the other side of the boat, hauls an enormous catch of fish. After breakfast, Peter experiences a deeply uncomfortable

conversation with the risen Jesus in which Jesus asks Peter three times, corresponding to Peter's three denials, whether he loves him. And on each occasion when Peter says 'you know that I love you', he instructs him to 'Feed my sheep'. In these moments Peter is transformed from fisherman to shepherd. But what strikes me, and moves me, is that Jesus is inviting Peter to share with him in his ministry of being a good shepherd. And as was the experience of Jesus, Peter will end up laying down his life for the sheep. Jesus says, 'when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go,' John adds the commentary, 'He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God' and tradition has it that Peter was crucified, but upside down.

Rowan Williams tells the story of another Peter, Peter French, a great missionary figure of the nineteenth century who spent much of his ministry as a bishop in the Persian Gulf at a time when the number of Christians in the area was in single figures. Peter French died there alone of fever on a beach in Muscat. Rowan Williams asks the question, 'What took him there?' The answer would seem to be a strong sense of call, but vitally a willingness to lay down his life for the sheep.

In this time of Covid-19 there are the stories of a number of priests in Italy who in serving those with the virus have laid down their lives and died. And in our own situation, maybe less dramatically, I'm struck by the way that churches are giving themselves to their communities in generosity. I'm also struck by the way that others within the community, with no obvious faith-connection, are responding with equal generosity. I, like many of you, stand outside our house, with our neighbours, with whom we are better connected than ever before, clapping those in our NHS, some of whom consciously, or not, follow the example of Jesus and are prepared to 'lay down their lives.'

We are still celebrating the season of Easter, and in our reading from Jn. 10, although the Good Shepherd lays down his life, it is not an act of romantic heroism. He lays it down 'in order to take it up again.' And this is central to the gospel. Without resurrection the gospel fails to be the gospel and there is no good news. Without resurrection, the lamb who takes away the sin of the world, is just another dead lamb. Nothing changes. But as St Augustine reminds us, 'We are an Easter people, and "Alleluia" is our song.' The resurrection is real! The Lamb of God is alive and greets us in the resurrection.

Just one further thought. Jesus, tantalisingly says, 'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.' To put it simply, Jesus is not done yet. God continues to call people from all walks of life, from all nations and from all generations since Jesus first uttered these words. Always he has more sheep to reach, sheep that are not of this fold – Jesus is not done yet. God continues to be at work, in us, among us, and through us as we reach out to God's world with the abundant life offered by the Good Shepherd – Jesus is not done yet. And those who will one day constitute Jesus' flock are beyond our imagining. There is a huge magnanimity about Jesus' words here and none of us know the extent of the fold that Jesus describes. All we know is that Jesus is not done yet. Jesus is still calling so that in time, as he says, there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He lays down his life for the sheep. It is a once and for all event. Except Jesus is not done yet as God continues to work out his purpose in us, among us, and through us, as he calls and gathers to his fold.