

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera QLD

26th April 2026 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 10:11-18

THE LOVING SHEPHERD

There are parts of the Bible which, as soon as you hear their introduction, you get an image in your head of what they are all about. That could even be used as a kind of trivia game, so let's try it out. What do you think of when you hear these words, and can you tell me what parts of the Bible they introduce: 'In the Beginning God created the heavens and the earth'? Genesis 1:1. 'About that time Emperor Augustus gave orders for the names of all the people to be listed in record books'? Luke 2- the intro to the Christmas story. 'Once a man had two sons'? The Parable of the Lost Son. 'A man went out to sow some seeds'? The parable of the Sower. 'In the Beginning was the Word and the Word was with God ...'? John 1:1 'I am the Good Shepherd, and the Good Shepherd gives up His life for the sheep'? John 10 The Good Shepherd – a bit of a gimme there. There is no doubt that this description of Jesus calling Himself the Good Shepherd in John 10, alongside Psalm 23, gives us one the best known and most loved parts of the Bible.

We know that protecting shepherds like this were common in Biblical times, so it's no wonder this is such a common theme in the Bible. King David was the shepherd-boy who became king, Moses served as a shepherd before he led God's people - kind of an apprenticeship for both of them really, 'if you can care for sheep you can care for my people' - and both God and the appointed leaders of His people are often called shepherds in the Old Testament. And to make sure that He is strongly linked with this picture or image, Jesus twice here calls Himself The Good Shepherd. To show what that means, He contrasts Himself with one kind of shepherd people would have been used to back then. These were hired hands, and often considered very lowly sorts. Remember how it was surprising that the news of Jesus' birth was announced to the shepherds? These shepherds worked for money only, so they were likely to steal a lamb or two if they thought they could get away with it. Because they only did what they were paid to do, when any kind of

trouble came along they were inclined to run off in case they themselves got hurt. Their concern wasn't for the flock in their care, it was for themselves.

But Jesus, He says, is the Good Shepherd, the one who willingly lays down His life for the sheep. So, for Jesus, the name 'Good Shepherd', isn't a job description, but it's about a relationship, a relationship which is based on love; His loving relationship with God the Father, which then flows on to His loving relationship with us, His children. Remember the picture we have here is of the shepherds of that time, and still some over there today, who lead their trusting sheep, instead of driving them as we are used to today. There is a story about a pastor was taking a group of parishioners on a tour of the Holy Land. He had just read them the Jesus words about being the Good Shepherd and was explaining to them that, as they continued their tour, they would see shepherds on the hillsides just as in Jesus' day. He described how, in the Holy Land, shepherds always lead their sheep, walking in front to face dangers, always protecting the sheep by going ahead of them. He barely got the last word out when, sure enough, they rounded a corner and saw a man and his sheep on the hillside. There was only one problem: the man wasn't leading the sheep as the pastor had said. No, he was behind the sheep and seemed to be chasing them. The pastor turned red. Upset, he ran over to the fence and said, "I always thought shepherds in this region led their sheep -- out in front. And I told my people that a good shepherd never chases his sheep." The man replied, "That's absolutely true... you're absolutely right... but I'm not the shepherd, I'm the butcher!"

The Good Shepherd isn't the one who drives the sheep to their death, but He's the One who leads them to life by giving up His own life. Jesus says here that the Good Shepherd gives up His life for the sheep, and in John 19:30 we read that, on the cross, Jesus' life wasn't taken from Him, but instead He gave it up, willingly. This was a sacrifice Jesus made both because of His love and obedience to the Father, and also His love for each one of the sheep. Here is why this image is so powerful and so well-loved; it talks about our relationship with God, a relationship based first and foremost on what He gives to us and what He offers to us; forgiveness and new life. All these things remind us that He is the owner, the caretaker, the provider and the defender of the flock. With all these things in together, He truly is, The Good Shepherd.

And of course, if Jesus is the shepherd, then we are ... the sheep. Not the greatest compliment to be given, is it, to be called a sheep? Perhaps though, 'sheep' is a very good picture of how we act sometimes. While the shepherd here is loving and perfect, as sheep we sometimes go kicking and bleating and running off because we don't want to go where He is leading us. His way offers care, protection, all that we need, and the life He has won for us, but too often we go off our own way and only find trouble for ourselves. We know this picture, we love all that it represents, but do we always choose to put ourselves as part of it?

The thing about the sheep here, is that the sheep listen to the voice of the shepherd. The shepherd calls, and the sheep follow. Back in Bible times, each shepherd would have his own flock of sheep to care for. But at night, so they can each get some sleep, four or five or more flocks would come together, and the shepherds then each took a turn on watch while the others slept. In the morning, separating the big mob into the small flocks once again was as easy as each shepherd going to a different spot and calling his sheep to come to him. Because they know his voice and trust him, they come. Our Shepherd calls us. He has called us to Himself when we were baptised. He calls us when we come and celebrate His death and resurrection in Holy Communion. And He calls us now whenever we read and hear His Word. Through the Holy Spirit, we are each called, we hear His voice. It's the voice which, as it did for those sheep, promises care, love, protection. For us also, it is the voice which promises forgiveness and new life. The call is always there for us, but what other voices can we sometimes listen to? Are there 'voices' which may not be bad in themselves, but which can be calling or distracting us away from the voice of our Shepherd? The Shepherd's call for us today is just as strong and clear as it was for those flocks of sheep we read about in the Bible; are there times when we need to be more deliberate and intentional in hearing it?

If Jesus is the Loving Shepherd, does that make us the Loving Sheep? There is a legend about John, the self-described 'disciple whom Jesus loved' and the author of this Gospel. In this story as an old man John is teaching some of his young disciples the principles of God's kingdom. After he got their attention, John raised his hand and uttered a word of wisdom: 'Little children, love one another'. One of the eager recruits replied, 'That's fine John, but how do we heal people as Jesus did?' The old man answered, 'Little

children, love one another'. Another chimed in, 'We get your point, John, but how can we become truly great and dynamic leaders?' A third time John repeated, 'Little children, love one another'. Love remains the essence and the basis of Jesus' servant style of leadership. As those who follow the shepherd, who hear His voice, we're reminded that love remains at the centre of not only our relationship with Him, but at the centre also of our relationships, our ministry, and our own 'shepherding' of all those people around us. Jesus makes the strong point here that He is the Good Shepherd so that all people can be with Him, and we are a part of His work in enabling that to happen. As we follow the Loving Shepherd, we are all called to be loving shepherds also.

It's good that this is such a well known and loved image, because it really does talk about the things we want people to remember about God and what faith in Him means. The Good Shepherd: the One who calls us into His love and care, who watches over us in the face of all danger, and who keeps us safe in His love and grace. We hear a lot of things calling us each day, but may the call of the Good Shepherd always come through. And, with His help, may we also always be seeking, through love, to lead others into His flock also. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Is there an image which always comes to you when you hear either Psalm 23, or Jesus saying, 'I am the Good Shepherd'? If so, what parts of that image convey the peace and security these two readings normally give us?
- Jesus says, 'I am the Good Shepherd'. Unpack a bit, either yourself or with others, what that means. How did Jesus show this in His life? How does He show it in our lives? How do you experience Jesus as the Good Shepherd in your life?
- We are also called to both hear the Shepherd's voice, and to be loving sheep ourselves. What other voices do you sometimes listen to which take you away from Him? How can you be more attentive to His voice? In what ways, in your daily life, can you be a part of leading others to hear His voice and know His love also?

Pray: thank God that in Jesus He comes to us as the Good Shepherd, in love laying down His life and giving us all we need. Ask that we both listen to His voice and be a part of helping others to know Him also.

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