

JOHN 10:7-18
ENFOLDED IN GOD'S LOVE

Jesus the good shepherd! Here's the question I've been wrestling with this week. Are there sheep in the city? Are there children who think that all sheep are like Shaun? That sheep are cartoon characters that misbehave because they have never seen a sheep in the flesh? How do we tell them this idea about Jesus? In Cambodia, looking at Jesus as shepherd I asked the question of my friends: "are there any sheep in Poipet?" because I hadn't seen any. There were six at the casinos for decoration! They were taken away because the climate was too hot for them in their wool; so in a country with no sheep, how do we understand Jesus as the shepherd? There are lots of cows so we talked about him as "the Cowherd"; indeed the old Scots version of Psalm 23 talks about "the Lord as my herd". How do we take a theme with which many of us are so familiar and translate it for people who have never seen a sheep in the flesh? What is this picture about?

It seems to me that when Jesus speaks about Himself as the good shepherd in John 10, there are two themes, both of them hugely important even today. The first is the question of leadership: what kind of leaders do we have, what kind of leaders do we need? What makes a good leader? The second is the question of being loved and cared for: how are we loved? Where do we find a sense of being loved? In the world, in the church, in the community, in all kinds of places, these two issues come up time and time again and here they are at the heart of the Bible; Jesus the good shepherd is the leader of His people and Jesus the good shepherd cares for His people and we are enfolded in His love.

Leadership: there is a whole backstory to John 10. Most famously, that back story includes Psalm 23: "the Lord..." (*Psalm 23:1*) which describes God's relationship to His people as leading them to water and grass and even through dark valleys. In the rest of the Old Testament, the Shepherd became the notion of God as the leader and the king of His people, and it also conveyed the idea of other leaders, kings, priests as shepherds of their people under God. Even in the Old Testament, some Bible pieces are critical of leaders who only care for themselves and show no interest in the welfare of the people they are supposed to lead; they have no idea of caring for the people, only for feathering their own nest! The shepherds were leaders; ultimately God was the shepherd of His people, leading them in right paths.

Jesus: "All who..." (*John 10:8*) "The thief..." (*John 10:10*) These are our leaders! It is not a great picture of leadership, but this is how Jesus described the religious leaders of His time, as people who acted like thieves, stealing from the sheep, creeping away from the sheep when life got dangerous and tough, thinking only of themselves. Jesus describes Himself as the good shepherd: "I have..." (*John 10:16*) Here is a leader who cares for His people and looks after their best interests, who wants to do what is best for His people and is prepared to go to any lengths to make sure that the people find life and peace and blessing. He is prepared to put His life on the line for His people, such is the quality of His leadership. Does He run away? Does He abandon His sheep? Does He leave us in lurch? No!

Leadership is a big issue in our world. We suffer from the wrong kind of leadership: many leaders are corrupt and are only in positions of power for their own sake; they amass great fortunes in Swiss bank accounts for themselves while their people go hungry and are poor. There are leaders who use their position to make people do things in their way; they are only there to fuel and feed their own ego. So the world suffers from the wrong kind of leadership. But there is also an issue about lack of leadership: leaders are supposed to make decisions that are for the good of the people they lead, but we suffer at times from a lack of that kind of leadership, as people distracted from making decisions, or are unwilling to make decisions that will be unpopular. We have the wrong kind of leadership and we suffer from a lack of good leadership.

The Church is no different. We can't throw stones at others until we admit that church leadership has not always been good. There are times when the church has had the wrong kind of leadership and there are times when we have suffered from a lack of leadership and the church has drifted along without any real direction. There are times when Church leadership has been corrupt, with leaders only looking after themselves. But we have Jesus as our model: the leader who cares for us should inspire us to care for one another. We talk about "pastoral care" in church life – here is where that idea comes from, from the idea of the shepherd caring for the sheep; so we care for one another because Jesus cares for us; we walk alongside others who are going through tough times in life because Jesus has walked alongside us. Jesus is the leader who cares for His people and who will go so far as to lay down His life for us. For those of us who are leaders in the life of the church, is that how we lead? Jesus the Good shepherd is the leader of His people.

Being Loved: are you aware of moments in life when you are loved? When someone cares for you? It is not always easy to allow ourselves to be loved and cared for by someone else! We want to be the ones doing the caring! Or we think that we're not worthy to be loved! The Windrush generation are people who feel very unloved just now: here is a group of people who came to the UK in the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's and made their home here and as they came into the country, no-one gave them papers, nobody did the official things to say that they belong; now 50 years on, some of them have been told that they don't belong and that they were here illegally and are not entitled to care and even should go "home". Nothing of this was their fault and some of them even expressed notion of being "unloved" by UK.

This is not an uncommon experience! Lots of young people will express a sense of being unloved, especially those whose experience of growing up is with foster parents and being moved time and time again to new places; so they sense that no-one really loves them. Adults also have expressed the same emotion at times: people who are supposed to care for them either ignore them or worse abuse them and so deep feelings of unease run through their hearts and minds and the notion of being loved is a foreign language. Sometimes, church as the place where we should find love and safety is also the place where we are ignored, even abused and will say that no-one really cares for us! Are you aware of moments when you are loved?

Be a sheep for a moment! Look at John 10 from the other side of the wall, from the point of view of being the sheep. What do you see in your good shepherd? You see someone who cares for you, who wants to give you the best possible quality of life, who leads you through life in right paths, who always and only wants what is best for you! This is his life's work; there is nothing else on his mind than your well-being. He is prepared later to give up His life for your sake, ready to die if that is what it takes to bring life to the sheep! "The death of the Palestinian shepherd meant disaster for his sheep. The death of the good shepherd means life for his sheep." (Morris p510) This is what your shepherd is like; this is how you are loved!

Are you aware of moments when you are loved and cared for? You might say that nobody really cares for you; you have no moments when you are aware of this kind of care. Sometimes we find it hard to open our hearts to be loved; we have been hurt so often that we're not ready to make ourselves vulnerable again. Here is Jesus and His love for us, the quality of love that is higher and deeper than any other love we will ever encounter. This is how we are loved; this is how Jesus loves us; this is quality of His love for us that goes way beyond anything we ever deserve; the Son of God who loves us and gives His life for us so that we might be saved. "I have..." (John 10:10) We are known by name; we are held in His arms; we are enfolded in His love.

Go back to the film trailer. Shaun and his pals disrupt life; they make mistakes; they make life hard for Bitzer, the sheepdog, and they get under the skin of the farmer, not that he always notices! There are times when we ignore God, when we fail to listen to Jesus, when we make

a mess of life or life is disrupted for us; there are times when we wander off in our own way, when we moan and complain that God has deserted us, but we're the ones who have moved; there are times when we find it hard to let God love us in the way that He wants. Life is never quite as peaceful and tranquil and ordered as we would like it; maybe Shaun is nearer to the truth about life than we'd like to admit!

In all of these times we are loved! Jesus loves us endlessly; Jesus loves us by laying down His life for us; Jesus loves us even when we find it hard to love ourselves. Are we aware of moments when we are loved and cared for? That is a huge question and not one to be answered lightly or to be dismissed. Think about it; consider it and then consider it again and consider how we are loved and that we are enfolded in Jesus' love for us. "*I am...*" (John 10:11)