

NR Sermon 26th April 2015

Acts 4:5-12, Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

“I am the Good Shepherd”

I started to prepare for this sermon about ten days ago, so corner stones, shepherd and sheep were much on my mind as we took a short break in the Yorkshire Dales last weekend.

Dry stone walls are very much a feature of the landscape in the Dales; you see them not only around fields, but also as sheep pens and shepherds’ refuges. I am not particularly knowledgeable about dry stone walls, but I am aware that there are many different local styles of building and in the Dales they make a feature at every few paces, at mid height in the wall of placing a key stone set at ninety degrees to the other stones. It is the key stone that is fundamental to the stability of the wall.

It serves very much as we heard this morning from Acts, where Peter told the rulers and elders in Jerusalem that Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom they had crucified, was the stone that they had rejected. When builders are searching around for ordinary stones to put up a wall, they reject the one with the odd shape, because it won’t fit. But when it comes to securing the wall, the stone with the strange angles is the very one they want. When Peter said that Jesus, the rejected stone, had become the cornerstone, he was alluding to Psalm 118, the Psalm of the Temple, which speaks about God’s life-giving power, in particular the way in which God brings his people through trouble and rescues them from danger.

That in turn brings us to the image of God the Shepherd of whom we sang in Psalm 23, ‘The Lord is my Shepherd’ and it would have been that Psalm that Jesus was quoting when he said “I am the Good Shepherd”. He would also have been referring to the prophet Ezekiel where the Lord God says “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down”. So here, Jesus was

identifying himself with God his Father, and saying that together they care for each one of us, just as a good shepherd knows what makes each sheep in his flock unique, and what their personal needs are. So we envisage a pastoral scene, where a shepherd clammers over the rocks to fetch back a single lost sheep. We imagine ourselves snuggling in the good shepherd's arms.

Travelling through the Dales and then returning across the Northumbrian Moors and on through the Borders we saw many large flocks of sheep and young lambs but, as is so often the case these days, you seldom see a shepherd in the fields, and if you do, it will probably be on a tractor. Yet we did spot, across a field, a young farmer carrying a distressed lamb, so whilst the size of flock today is much greater than when Jesus said he was the good shepherd, the role has not changed.

Whilst Jesus gave us this beautiful image of a shepherd, he also said that there were bad shepherds and it would not have taken a particularly clever Pharisee to recognise that Jesus was alluding to another part of Ezekiel 34 where he says that the bad shepherds :

Fed themselves, but not the flock

Slaughtered the fat sheep, dressed in fine woollen garments but did not feed the flock

Did not care for the sick, diseased or broken sheep

Did not seek the lost or scattered sheep

Jesus was making a very clear point -the Pharisees were the bad shepherds who had let the sheep down, but now Jesus is the good shepherd who will love the flock, sacrificially. Yes, a shepherd who loves his flock enough to die for them.

The relationship that the Good Shepherd has with his flock is a mirror of the relationship that Jesus enjoyed with his own Father; the Good Shepherd is a sheep to his Father God. And so it is that Jesus leads us by example. The Good Shepherd,

who knows what it is to be a faithful sheep, leads us and exhorts us to trust in him, to enjoy his protection and go wherever he leads.

In the days of Jesus the shepherd's life was lived at a slow pace – they had time to think and reflect, whereas today our lives are all a constant rush; but we still need someone to love us, guide us and rescue us, but we also need someone to help slow us down. Even Jesus, when he found he was too busy to stop and think, went out and spent a night alone on a mountain in prayer; prayer is essential to our spiritual life as water is to someone crossing a desert.

I'd like to share with you a famous re-writing of Psalm 23 by a Japanese woman called Toki Miyashina. It is entitled 'The Lord is my Pace-Setter' and talks about how God can help us to slow down and make time for prayer :

The Lord is my Pace-setter, I shall not rush;
He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals.
He provides me with images of stillness,
which restore my serenity.
He leads me in ways of efficiency
through calmness of mind,
and his guidance is peace.
Even though I have a great many things
to accomplish each day,
I will not fret, for his presence is here;
his timelessness, his all-importance,
will keep me in balance.
He prepares refreshment and renewal
in the midst of my activity,
by anointing my mind with oils of tranquillity.
My cup of joyous energy overflows;

such harmony and effectiveness
shall be the fruits of my hours,
for I shall walk in the pace of the Lord,
and dwell in his house for ever.

If we are to be good sheep and really come to know our Good Shepherd and his voice, then we need to slow down and listen. Maybe this poem will be a help.

Amen.