

John 10:11-18 I am the good shepherd

Tim Anderson 20/2/22

Just up in Stumpy Gully Road,
we have a petting zoo.
It's called Rain, Haine and Shine.
For a price, you can go and cuddle the cute little animals.
Pat the lambs, quack at the ducks and try to do mental arithmetic
to calculate just how much bacon is on that ginormous pig.
And I think our picture of what a shepherd is
has been somewhat affected by our experiences
of places like Rain, Haine and Shine.
Now you might never have been there.
But you are still affected.
Because when we think shepherd,
we think cute cuddly lambs.
We think slightly effeminate men,
like the pictures of Jesus you see in stained glass windows
cuddling cute cuddly lambs.
And that's what a shepherd is.
A better picture would be that of a drover.
That quintessentially Australian profession,
beloved of the likes of Henry Lawson.
These were hard men.
Men who slept rough for months on end.
Men who did hard physical work and endured danger at work,
in a time when occupational health and safety had not been invented.
Men who knew how to spend their money when the pay check came
and the pubs were open.
And as you might expect in first century Judaism,
just like in 19th century Australia,
when it came time to throw a dinner party in polite society,

they were not top of the invite list.

That's a drover.

That's a shepherd.

And Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd."

It's worth thinking about what a shepherd was.

A shepherd was someone who put his body on the line to do his job.

Prior to being anointed king, David was a shepherd boy.

He tells us that he killed a lion and a bear

when he's trying to convince king Saul

that it's OK for him to have a go at fighting the Philistine, Goliath.

There's danger involved there.

How would you like to be in one on one combat with a lion?

Not my idea of an easy day at the office.

Jesus is prepared to put his body on the line to look after his sheep.

And we are his sheep.

Jesus is the good shepherd.

That sort of implies that not all shepherds were good.

Some shepherds were bad.

But Jesus is the good one.

Well the picture of bad shepherds was well established

in the Old Testament.

Shepherds were used as a metaphor for leaders of God's people.

The people were the flock.

And the shepherd was the leader of the people.

Someone who was meant to put their body on the line,

to keep the people safe,

to guide them towards flourishing.

Being a leader of God's people

wasn't about sitting in an air conditioned office in Canberra

drawing a very large salary.

It was about leading the people out onto the battle field

when God's enemies threatened his people.
This was not unlike the shepherd with the lion or the bear.
Our politicians will jump in a fighter jet for a photo op.
But would they fly one into a combat situation?
Don't be silly.
But in those days,
the King led the troops personally onto the battlefield.
King Saul died on the battlefield with his son and heir Jonathan.
So did King Josiah.
There's a good reason that queens tend to have longer reigns than kings.
It's not just because women live longer.
The shepherd was the leader of the people.
The bad shepherd was a leader who didn't do their job right.
I want to read you a couple of passages about bad shepherds.
They help us to understand by contrast
what it means for Jesus to be the good shepherd.

This is Ezekiel 34:1-10.

34 The word of the Lord came to me:

²“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel;
prophesy and say to them:

‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves!

Should not shepherds take care of the flock?

³ You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool
and slaughter the choice animals,
but you do not take care of the flock.

⁴ You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick
or bound up the injured.

You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost.

You have ruled them harshly and brutally.

⁵ So they were scattered because there was no shepherd,

and when they were scattered
they became food for all the wild animals.

⁶ My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill.
They were scattered over the whole earth,
and no one searched or looked for them.

⁷ “Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord:

⁸ As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord,
because my flock lacks a shepherd
and so has been plundered
and has become food for all the wild animals,
and because my shepherds did not search for my flock
but cared for themselves rather than for my flock,

⁹ therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord:

¹⁰ This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock.
I will remove them from tending the flock
so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves.
I will rescue my flock from their mouths,
and it will no longer be food for them.

So what are the characteristics of leaders of God's people,
that earn them the label 'bad shepherds'?

They look after themselves
and not the people God gave them to look after.
When God's people are wandering from him,
they haven't gone after them
and encouraged them to love and serve him again.
They have left God's people easy prey
for any false religion that seeks to ensnare them.

Here's another passage about bad shepherds.

This is Zech 11:15-17

¹⁵ Then the Lord said to me,
“Take again the equipment of a foolish shepherd.
¹⁶ For I am going to raise up a shepherd over the land
who will not care for the lost, or seek the young, or heal the injured,
or feed the healthy,
but will eat the meat of the choice sheep, tearing off their hooves.
¹⁷ “Woe to the worthless shepherd,
who deserts the flock!
May the sword strike his arm and his right eye!
May his arm be completely withered,
his right eye totally blinded!”

It's a similar story, right?

The bad shepherd lets people wander away from their God.
When their relationship with God is damaged,
the bad shepherd can't be bothered trying to help them heal.
And in both cases, God stands in judgement over the bad shepherds.

So Jesus the good shepherd is the opposite picture to those bad shepherds.
Where the bad shepherds let people wander away from God,
Jesus goes out of his way to bring sinners back to God.
The parable Jesus told about the shepherd who would leave the 99 sheep
to go searching for the one lost sheep
is a great example of the heart of Jesus for the lost.
When Jesus comes across people like tax collectors and prostitutes
whose relationship with God is seriously damaged,
Jesus the good shepherd seeks to heal the relationship.
Jesus does the things
God expected the leaders of his people in the Old Testament to do.
The kings and priests were not real flash shepherds.
But Jesus is a good shepherd.

But there's an even more significant part of Jesus' shepherding.
So significant that Jesus says it three times in this passage.

And so significant

that the Old Testament shepherds were not asked to do this.

Jesus, the good shepherd, lays down his life for the sheep.

Now we sometimes talk about laying down our lives.

A mother who feels her children are ungrateful might say,
"I've laid down my life for you lot.

Changed your nappies, cared for you when you were sick,
washed your clothes, and cooked your dinner,
and now you won't even lift a finger to help me ..."

Fair enough.

To my shame, I can hear the echoes of my own mother's voice.

But Jesus is not speaking metaphorically.

He's talking about the shepherd actually dying for the sheep.

We might talk about that kind of thing on Anzac Day.

But even there, the soldiers are not intentionally getting killed.

They put themselves in harm's way for their country.

But if they can avoid death and complete their mission, they will.

But Jesus' mission is to die.

He could not avoid death.

He is the good shepherd who consciously, intentionally,
goes to his death for the sake of the sheep.

When you read through the gospels,

it's striking how intentionally Jesus goes to his death.

He sets his face towards Jerusalem,

knowing that is was there he must go in order to die.

He speaks of the woman who poured expensive perfume on him,
as anointing his body for burial in advance.

He tells Judas at the last supper to go and do what has to do.

Aiding and abetting his betrayer.

He refuses all help, whether angelic or Peter getting out his sword,
in the garden of Gethsemane.

He volunteers himself to the soldiers come to arrest him.

Even on the cross, he gives up his spirit.

The thieves crucified next to him took longer to die
because Jesus voluntarily relinquished his life.

Here Jesus says, 10:18 "No one takes it from me,
but I lay it down of my own accord."

God holds accountable those who killed his Son.

But his Son definitely gave up his life voluntarily.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

OK Here's something a bit more technical than I would normally venture.

So if technical is not your thing,

I'll let you know when it's safe to tune in again.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

That means when Jesus died,

it was a positive decision on Jesus' part.

Sometimes we talk a bit lazily

about God the Father punishing his Son, Jesus, for the sins of the world.

It's great that we recognise that Jesus is our substitute.

But there's still a weakness with talking about it that way.

It sounds like the Father inflicted something on his Son.

There are people out there who naturally recoil at this.

It makes it hard for them to accept God's justice

if they hear it presented

like the Father is appeasing his wrath on an innocent third party.

In his greatest book, "The Cross of Christ", John Stott says,

"We must never make Christ the object of God's punishment ...

for both God and Christ were subjects not objects,

taking the initiative together to save sinners."

If the Father gave the Son,

the son also gave himself.

The Father did not lay on the Son an ordeal he was reluctant to bear.

Yes, in the garden of Gethsemane, we can tell it was supremely difficult.

But it was totally voluntary.

It was something that Jesus took the initiative to make happen.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

So when you are talking about the atonement,

(that's what we call how our sins were forgiven),

always try to describe it with Jesus as an initiative taker,

not as someone who had something done to him.

You'd be surprised how many people

find poor descriptions of the atonement

a stumbling block to accepting the gospel.

So it's worth making an effort to get it right,

technical and pedantic though it seems.

Alright, that's the technical bit.

If you tuned out, you can tune back in again now.

The last thing I want to say about the good shepherd
is to make the contrast.

Last week we looked at I am the gate,

And the contrast with Jesus, the gate were the thieves and robbers.

This time the contrast with Jesus the good shepherd is the hired hand.

Now a hired hand is not a thief or a robber.

The hired hand is someone who is employed to do a job,

most of the time they do the job OK,

but when push comes to shove,

they are only a hired hand.

So if the job gets dangerous

and they decide that it's not worth the money,

they do a runner.

Now let me say,

if I were advising a teenager about their first job,
I would be advising them to be a hired hand.
Nothing against hired hands.
If your boss asks you to do something dangerous,
it's not worth the money.
Get yourself out of there.
We have nothing against hired hands in the workplace.
But Jesus, the good shepherd is not one of them.
Jesus is personally invested in the sheep.
He's doing his job as a shepherd.
And no personal risk is going to deter him.
Your shepherd has got your back.
Does this tell us anything more
than Jesus is prepared to lay down his life for the sheep?
Well yes I think it does.
There is more than one reason
that Jesus might be prepared to lay down his life for the sheep.
One reason is because of the love he shares with the Father.
10:17 "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life".
Which is not to say Jesus was earning the Father's love
by laying down his life.
It's that they have a perfect relationship of love.
And if the Father wants Jesus to lay down his life,
then Jesus will lay it down willingly
because of his love for his Father.
And the Father will love the Son for his beautiful attitude of sacrifice.
The love between the Father and Son
is one reason Jesus lays down his life.
But it's not the only reason.
Jesus also loves the sheep.
The hired hand doesn't care for the sheep.
For him they are just a job.

They are a means to put food on the table and a roof over his head.
But the shepherd is another story.
The shepherd cares about his sheep.
That's the contrast with the hired hand.
The hired hand doesn't care.
The shepherd does care.
Jesus cares for you.
He didn't just die for you in some distant transaction to please his Father.
He died for you because he cares deeply about you.

I think that's important too.
Forgiveness to placate a distant God
seems a very dry impersonal transaction.
We might be able to demonstrate that it's necessary
to a person with a strong sense of duty.
But it doesn't capture your heart like a shepherd who cares for you.
In this world everyone is looking for connection.
People feel isolated, not just when they are in lockdown,
but all the time.
Who better to be connected with
than the good shepherd who cares for the sheep.

Now you might wonder,
"How can we get people to understand
that the Good Shepherd cares for them?"
Here's a thought.
They will be more ready to believe you when you tell them,
if they have experienced you caring for them.

So the Good Shepherd.
Here are three things.
1. The Good Shepherd is not a bad shepherd.

Bad shepherds don't care if the sheep stray away from God.

The Good Shepherd will go to extreme lengths
to restore the sheep to a right relationship with God.

2. The Good Shepherd lays down his life.

This is Jesus taking the initiative to give his life for the sins of the world.

No one took it from him.

It's something he chose to do.

3. The Good Shepherd is not a hired hand.

Unlike a hired hand, he cares deeply for the sheep.

Whoever you are,

Jesus cares for you.