

Sermon, April 21, 2024
John 10: 1-18

“The Good Shepherd”

Throughout the centuries in the last two thousand years there have been changes of emphasis on the nature and role of Jesus Christ in the world, and you can see this reflected in the art of the time. For example, in the Middle Ages great emphasis was placed on Jesus as the great judge of humanity, and large mosaics in various churches portray a rather stern looking face of Jesus looking down on those gathered in the sanctuary. But in the first five hundred years of the Church’s history the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd was very popular. An early example of this would be a painting in the Catacombs of Priscilla from the late 2nd century, which depicts a young Jesus with two sheep standing on either side of him, and one lamb draped across his shoulders. That was a motif that was borrowed from Ancient Greek and Roman sculptures, which depicted a man walking, carrying a lamb on his shoulders that was to be sacrificed to the gods. Early Christian artists took up this image, but the roles were reversed where the man, Jesus, was the sacrifice, and the lamb was the one to be saved. Obviously, the artwork was inspired by today’s reading, and Jesus was emphasized as the one who leads the sheep to greener pastures - the sheep, of course, representing those who choose to follow his lead.

Now, if you carefully follow today’s reading, which should be understood as a parable, you find Jesus describing himself in two different ways. In verse two Jesus says, “The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out”. I think we can see the gatekeeper who opens the gate as God the Father, and the one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep, that being Jesus. But then in verse seven Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep”. In other words, Jesus speaks of himself as both the gate and the one who leads the sheep through the gate.

So, if we break this down, God is the gatekeeper who opens the gate for Jesus, meaning that God has sent Jesus into the world to lead people to abundance of life. Then, Jesus is the gate that is opened, meaning he is the one who shows the Way to that abundance, and those who know the shepherd’s voice are the ones who have heard and understood what Jesus has taught, and, therefore, choose to follow. The fact that the shepherd knows the sheep by name suggests that Jesus recognizes those who have understood and are his true followers.

But, again, a close reading of the text shows that this passage is a polemic against those who are false teachers and leaders who are leading the people in the wrong direction.

If we look at this within its historical context, we know that Jesus is referring to both leaders of the anti-Roman revolutionary movement, such as Barabbas who were trying to lead the people into a

violent overthrow of their Roman oppressors, as well as some of the leaders in his own Jewish religion who saw him as someone who was leading the people astray. Notice that some of them were speaking of Jesus as being possessed by a demon.

This is very pertinent for today when we consider those who twist Jesus' words in ways that contradict what he was talking about. An example would be those who preach what is called the 'prosperity gospel'. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly". This is twisted to mean that having true faith leads to material prosperity and wealth, when Jesus was talking about spiritual riches, lives filled with love and compassion, as well as a lack of fear of both life and death, a life freed from the burden of guilt through the grace of divine forgiveness.

It is also the case that Jesus and other biblical teachings have been used to justify antisemitism, as well as other forms of bigotry and racism. Recently I have been doing a lot of reading on the history and culture of Native Americans, and it is heartbreaking to see how often the near annihilation of Native life and culture was done in the name of Jesus!

Moving further into today's reading we find Jesus referring to himself not only as the Good Shepherd, but, also, as the shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. As we know, shepherds have the responsibility of caring for sheep by leading them to green pastures and still waters so that they may be well fed and hydrated, but also tasked to be their protector from wolves and other predatory creatures. Of course, in the real world, there is a problem with this analogy. If a shepherd dies in fighting off wolves that leaves the sheep really vulnerable to attack and almost certain death, but Jesus is not really talking literally about sheep and wolves but is referring to protecting us from those who espouse things that are contrary to what he teaches, as well as passing through the gate of salvation through his life, death, and resurrection.

Traditional Christian theology places great emphasis on his death and resurrection as that through which our sinful selves are reconciled with God, but we can't lose sight of his life and what it demonstrates for us through his words and actions. Jesus showed us a different way of being in the world. He gave us a vision of a coming kingdom of God, a world where the lion lies down with the lamb, where hatred that encourages violence is no more, where the equality of all people is seen as the norm, where hunger does not exist, where peace and Justice reign in the hearts and minds of all of humanity, and where people, nature, and the Creator live in harmony. The death and resurrection of the Good Shepherd gives to us the hope of greener pastures beyond our own death, but his life also gives us the inspiration to create greener pastures within the world of here and now! Amen.

Let us pray: O God, giver of all good, who continually pours your benefits upon us, age after age the living wait upon you and find that of your faithfulness there is no end and that your care is unfailing. We praise you that the mystery of our life is a mystery of infinite goodness. We praise you for the order and constancy of nature; for the beauty and bounty of the earth, and for the varied gifts of loveliness and use which every season brings. We give you thanks for the joy of life, for our homes, for our friends, and all the love and goodwill of all people. Amen.