

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 10:1-10

"The Shepherd"

In the Middle East, a shepherd will go into a crowded sheepfold and call out his own sheep one by one, calling them by name. They will recognize his voice and they will come to him. The shepherd, after all, spends most hours of most days in the company of his sheep. He knows their individual characteristics, their markings, their likes and dislikes. What's even more important, they know him. They know his voice. Somebody else can come to the sheepfold and they will not go near him, even if he calls out their correct names. The sheep are always listening for the one voice that matters, the voice they trust. When they hear it, the shepherd won't need a sheepdog to keep them in line; he won't walk behind them. To be driving them on He walks ahead of them, calling to them, and they simply follow him.

In the Bible the picture of the shepherd with his sheep is frequently used to refer to the king and his people or the leader and his people. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David they were all shepherd leading the people of Israel. In today's modern world we don't think of presidents, Prime Ministers or national leaders in quite that way. Today, when we think of leaders, we get the image of people who are running huge companies, or the presidents of banks and huge corporations. We think of people sitting behind desks, dictating letters or chairing board meetings. Quite often these kinds of people are quite removed from most of the people who work in their organization and they seldom see them face to face, and they probably don't know the names of very many – and they delegate the communication to other to talk with their people. But in the Bible the ideal king is pictured as a shepherd – depicted in Ezekiel chapter 34 – which might very well be modelled after the young ruddy faced shepherd-boy named David, who became the king after God's own heart. In a world where they knew about the intimate contact and trust between shepherd and sheep, this was their preferred way of talking about kingship.

In today's Holy Gospel, Jesus projects for the people who were there, and for us, an image that these people were pretty familiar with – Jesus shows the way in which the shepherd keeps the sheep safe, and, like God himself in Psalm 121:8, *"watches over their going out and their coming in."* The emphasis is on the safety, and the fulfilled life of the sheep. The shepherd has no business looking out for his own interests. His sole priority is the sheep. If you find a king like that, then you've found the Lord's anointed One – the Messiah.

After a shepherd's flock has been separated from any of the other sheep that are not in his care, he takes them out to the pasture. Near the pasture is a pen for the sheep. The shepherd takes his place in the doorway or entrance and acts as a door or gate to the pasture. The sheep can go out to the pasture in front of the pen, or if they are afraid, they can retreat into the security of the pen. I believe that Jesus is unmistakably giving us His spiritual meaning - which is that He is the ONLY Gate by which people can enter into the safety and blessing of God's provision for them for all eternity. As we know Jesus will even more visibly state this to His disciples on the

night that He will be arrested by saying *"I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."* (John 14:6)

In many Eastern sheepfolds, the shepherd lies down at night in the gateway, to stop the sheep getting out and to stop predators getting in.

Here Jesus is talking, in an abstract way, about the difference between true shepherds and false ones. So - just who are these false ones? Jesus says they are thieves and robbers, complete strangers to the sheep. I think that Jesus almost certainly had in mind various people in leadership during His own lifetime. Maybe they were Zealots or revolutionary leaders who were somewhat eager to lead Israel into confrontation with the powers that ruled over them - especially the Romans. There were others like the ruling house of Herod, who were eager to submit to the ruling power of Rome - as long as it meant keeping their own power and wealth in place -if you will - their own job security. I also should remind you that in the Gospel of John - this event takes place right after Jesus healed the blind man and the Pharisees were all over Him for doing that on the Sabbath. These so called spiritual leaders were leading God's people toward paths that they were not intended by God to go down.

In Jesus bringing this shepherding image to these people - He is, in a sense, asking the question: **how will you tell God's true, appointed King when He comes?** The answer is that you can tell the true king the very same way you can tell the true shepherd. Anybody can turn up in Jerusalem and give himself airs proclaiming himself as a leader or a Messiah. But only the One who comes by the way God has appointed has the right to do so. Anyone can call followers, but the sign of the real King is the response that comes from the heart, when people hear His voice and, in loving trust, follow Him.

It is important to mention that right after today's Holy Gospel - Jesus continued speaking about being the shepherd for His people. In the verses of John chapter ten, beginning with verse 11 Jesus says: *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-- just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep."* (John 10:11-15)

Many people equated the God who revealed Himself in the Old Testament, which in Jesus' day were called the Scriptures - as the shepherd of His people. Look at today's Psalm - Psalm 23 which begins with words *"The Lord is my shepherd."* The Prophet Isaiah describes the Lord God as He tends his flock like a shepherd: *"He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."* (Isaiah 40:11) The Psalmist writes in Psalm 80:1-2 *"Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock; you who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us."* When Jesus proclaimed Himself as the "good

shepherd” I believe He spoke with certainty and authority – saying to the people of God *“I Am the Good Shepherd...”* that He made the connection for us not only to the many Scriptures about God as a shepherd, but that He Himself is God! Just as God spoke to Moses as the burning bush in Exodus 3:6 when He said *“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.”* In verse 14 after Moses asked God what His name was He replied: *“I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”* In Jesus’ saying *“I am the Good Shepherd”* He was telling the world that *“I AM WHO I AM.”* In effect Jesus was saying the very same thing, when He said:

- *“I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life,”*
- *“I am the resurrection and the life”*
- *“I am the bread of life”*
- *“I am the gate”*
- *“I am the vine”*
- *“I am the Light of the world”*

He further indicates His love for His people – His sheep – that as their shepherd – their Good Shepherd saying *“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-- just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep.”*

Isn’t it amazing that we are that important to God? That He speaks to us through His Word, He cares for us and watches over us – providing for us and protecting us? More importantly – God loves us so much that He laid down His very life on our behalf. I don’t think that most of us really take the time to stop and think that God loves us so much that as the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:23 *“You were bought at a price”* the debt has been paid for the sins. The Apostle John in his first epistle 1 John 2:2 wrote *“He is the propitiation for our sins”* or *“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”* You hear me say those words every Sunday after the absolution – at the end of what we call “the Comfortable Words.” I walk down the aisle and bring those words to you. Today - let those words sink in –

- that Jesus Christ, the righteous Good Shepherd - stood in the way of the one who seeks to drag you down, to make you feel guilty for your sins, but Jesus paid the bounty on your life.
- Jesus, the righteous Good Shepherd willingly laid down His life for you – His loving sheep. You are that precious to Him. Listen today, to take the time to hear His voice, and follow.