

Sermon for Easter 4

John 10:11-18

I have never really thought of being a shepherd as a risky job. It conjures up for me images of people in slightly scruffy clothes with a border collie or two on a hillside somewhere in the UK. The biggest risk is that the weather might turn nasty as you are out in the fields, but it's basically a healthy outdoor pursuit, featuring plenty of exercise and hard work.

But listen to this from the prophet Amos:

¹² Thus says the Lord: As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who live in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and part of a bed. (Amos 3:12)

Amos uses the image of a few bits of a sheep being snatched from a lion's jaw to illustrate that some people from Samaria might escape the impending destruction of their city. But he must be referring to something that was known to happen. Why would you take a risk like that with a lion?

One reason might be that it is what the law required to avoid the shepherd having to pay restitution to the owner

¹³ If it was mangled by beasts, let it be brought as evidence; restitution shall not be made for the mangled remains. (Exodus 22:13)

For example, before going off to fight Goliath, David describes to King Saul how he fought off lion and a bear to defend his father's sheep (1 Samuel 17:34-36). Usually it took more than one shepherd to see off a lion – Isaiah refers to a crowd of shepherds being needed (Isaiah 31:4)

So to be a good shepherd in the Bible, you had to be prepared to risk your life. For the shepherds who were born to the job, it was based on a relationship – they loved their sheep and they would put themselves at risk in order to defend them in their vulnerability. As we know from Psalm 23 and elsewhere, God is compared to good shepherds.

But there were also hired hands. They were not attached to their sheep in the same way, and instead would seek to protect themselves, rather than risk their lives. Their interest was only financial, and if the risk became too great, they would forego their pay. Such false or foolish shepherds are also referred to in the Bible.

The prophet Zechariah describes a false or foolish shepherd as follows

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. (Zechariah 11:16)

Now when we think about Jesus, he is actually the opposite of items on that list. He came to seek and to save the lost, wanted little children to come to him, healed many and even fed the healthy at the feeding of the 5,000. If you take Zechariah's list and reverse it, it's like a mission statement for Jesus. Jesus is *the* good shepherd

Of course people can be morally good, but quite boring or dull, And not necessarily ones who could lead and inspire. There are two words in the original language of the New Testament that could have been used for good – one means morally good (*agathos*), but the one used here (*kalos*) means a goodness that is attractive, lovely, even compelling.

Jesus also suggests here that those who follow him face two threats:

1. From 'wolves'. Elsewhere he speaks of his followers as sheep amongst wolves, and this suggests he saw real personal danger from those who opposed his message.
2. From bad shepherds. I don't think this is necessarily about competence, but about where the heart is. If a shepherd is simply concerned about career, money or status, then they will not have the well-being of their flock at heart. And bad shepherds are much more likely to let the wolves in.

You may have recently heard about a report for the Church of England on racism within the church. There are some terrible examples of where people have been mistreated as a direct result of their skin colour or ethnic background – including someone who was recently training for the ministry in Durham. He got a rejection letter which essentially said that because he was black he wouldn't relate to the white parish. They never even met him, let alone gave him a chance to share how he been ministering as a lay person in a very white church. That letter came from someone in a leadership position – they were a bad shepherd in the way they acted, and they allowed the wolf of racism to continue to flourish within the church. We can't stop someone who is racially prejudiced coming to church – hopefully their prejudice might be challenged; we must ensure that those in positions of responsibility do not carry such prejudice.

Jesus lived in a time of prejudice – in the New Testament we see prejudice against Samaritans, Gentiles, those who were seen as 'unclean', including those born with disabilities. Here in verse 16, Jesus speaks of there being other sheep who will be brought into one flock. In other words, in the community that follows Jesus, there is no distinction between people. Following Jesus gives us all the equal status of being part of his flock. There is no preference, no status, no advantage of skin colour or nationality in that flock; nor should there be in the church institution which claims to be the manifestation of that flock in our world today.

Jesus' final words in this section confirm why this is the case. He chooses to lay down his life of his own accord and is also confident that he will receive it back. But by laying down that life, he will model a way of service and of sacrifice. That is a rejection of any way of life that seeks status as an end in itself. So often seeking status can mean putting others down in order to elevate ourselves. Sacrifice and service are the contradiction of this.

So Jesus is the good shepherd, the one who risks all for us, the one who loves us so much that he laid down his life for us. He did so making no distinction, ignoring the labels and prejudices which we so often bring, and he did so seeking to create one people and one flock, united with equal dignity as members of his flock. May we continue to live in that spirit in every aspect of our lives. Amen.