

Sermon: Knowing the voice of the Shepherd

Reading: John 1; 10-19

Introduction:

It is often said that people are like sheep as we like to follow things and one another. The more sports minded amongst us follow their teams whether its football or cricket etc. The enthusiastic may even wear their team colours. They shout and cheer when their team wins and weep when they lose! The less sporty may follow their favourite TV programmes religiously, whether it be the soaps, gardening, cookery, home make overs or even 'Songs of Praise'.

There are many things online which vie for our attention to gain our following, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube etc as well as the age old ones such as fashion, music, popular cultural trends or political parties. When we consider our own lives, what interests us most about what or whom we follow?

Psychologists suggest there are different types of followers which range from the fanatical, who are so committed they follow with an undying commitment. The other end of the spectrum is the more passive follower, who just follow blindly without critical thought or using initiative.

When it comes to our faith, do we follow church or do we follow Jesus? There is a big difference between the two. When I say church, I am speaking about denominations and their ways of doing things. When I speak about Jesus I am speaking about following the risen Christ and being obedient to His voice and word. How would others describe our commitment to being a Jesus follower? Would they say we are as committed as the disciples who would follow Jesus to the end of the world? Or would people say we are lukewarm and don't take it all too seriously?

It's an important question to consider because we have a Shepherd who calls us to follow Him as He leads us in life. Are we living our faith through Jesus, or is our Christianity really just churchianity which is more like a hobby than a lifestyle commitment?

Our reading draws our attention to the Good Shepherd who calls us to follow Him and our faith in this Good Shepherd is well appointed.

Context:

To set the context of our reading, we need to cover briefly a couple of chapters. As we do we discover the religious leaders are in a continual confrontation with Jesus. They don't like Jesus at all. The chief priests, elders, Pharisees and Sadducees have for the most part rejected Jesus and His teaching. They shown their frustration of Him and declared openly their hatred of Him, setting on a course to destroy Him publicly. By the time we get to chapter 10 these groups have attempted at least 3 times to bring about Jesus demise and failed each time.

We sometimes get the impression when we hear people speak of Jesus that He was some kind of social worker, or a good teacher who only speaks words of love, acceptance and tolerance. Jesus as a mild mannered speaker, never offends anyone. This may be the preferred Jesus of the world but it is not my Jesus, it's certainly not the Jesus we read about in Scripture. My Jesus does not run from problems, He stands up to challenges. He is not afraid to call out the hypocrite and associate with the lowly, the mingle with despised, to defend the prostitutes, to challenge the sophisticates or even call tax collectors to follow

Him. Jesus doesn't soft soap or skirt around issues, He was never afraid to confront sin when He saw it and does not flower up His words to make things seem better than they actually are. Truth is truth and Jesus declares it openly and boldly Listen to what Jesus says to the Pharisees as He challenging them about their hypocrisy saying, "You are of your father the devil" (Jn 8:44). The religious thought they were doing God's work, no wonder they wanted to kill him, so they, 'Picked up stones to stone Him,' **(John 8:59)**.

My Jesus is no mild mannered, weak and feeble, woke, politically correct leader. My Jesus is bold, courageous, strong, willing to make a stand without compromising.

My Jesus is also gentle, kind and loving, full of grace and truth and this is shown by His patience and care of the band of men He calls to follow Him. The sheep He calls to be His flock as He is the Good Shepherd.

Jesus looks after His sheep, defending them even to laying down His life for them. None of them were caught or hurt in the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus gives over His life to let His disciples go freely. Jesus will never let us down, nor will He forsake or abandon us when the going gets tough. Jesus is with us the whole way, till the end of time.

Lost sheep

Chapter 10 begins with these words, "Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheepthe sheep listen to his voice" **(John 10: 1-2)**.

I wanted to begin here because the Scriptures speak of God's people as sheep and this can be misunderstood by the secular world. Sheep generally are considered passive and dependent, simply blindly following. In a culture which applauds independence, free thinking and challenging social norms and traditions, Christians can be viewed as weak, narrow minded and gullible.

To set the record straight I wanted to highlight God calls all of mankind who are like sheep blindly wandered, the prophet Isaiah writes, 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way' **(Isa 53:6)**.

In this passage from Isaiah, God's charge against mankind is for their sheeplike mentality in straying away from Him and the ways which will bring life, instead they have strayed into dangerous paths which will bring about their demise. The Scriptures declare all mankind are like sheep, simply following one another blindly in the ways of the world.

It's interesting that the worldly do not consider themselves as sheep but in reality they are, they are just following a different shepherd, a hired hand so to speak.

What makes the sheep who follow YHWH different to the sheep of the world? The answer is simply the Good Shepherd, Jesus is what makes us different and sets us apart from the sheep of the world.

Christians are not passive, blindly following and not thinking for themselves, anyone who thinks like this has no idea what a real Christian actually is. When we look at Jesus in the Gospels is this the image we have of Him? Certainly not and Christians are called to be Christlike. That takes courage, boldness and a strength of character to stand alone, even when we stand against the tide of the world.

True Christians are not following a denomination or institution for its sake, they follow a risen Saviour not a personality, set of religious rules or denominational belief system.

Christians are followers of Jesus, born again, Spirit filled, bible believing, committed followers of the Risen Saviour.

The true believers have discovered a new life in Christ which they never knew before and so the words of verse 10 will resonate with them, unfortunately this verse is often taken as out of context and used as a pretext. Listen to what Jesus says and see if this sounds familiar..... 'The thief only comes to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full' (**John 10:10**).

Far too many people read this verse as a pretext and misapply it to themselves as an excuse to live life to the full by enjoying themselves today, thinking, God wants me to be happy and has called me to live my life to the full, doesn't that mean to enjoy myself? This depends whether your idea of enjoying yourself is living for yourself selfishly and for personal gain!

The great object for which Jesus Christ came **is** about, 'Life' and that we can have it 'More abundantly,' or in full. So what does Jesus mean?

Life in fulness!

When read in context we see in the preceding chapter, Jesus heals a man who was born blind (**John 9**). The man was questioned by the Pharisees about his healing. They mocked the man for trusting Jesus. When Jesus heard what happened, He went to the man, revealed Himself as the one who brought about his healing and introduces himself as the Son of Man (It's a divine introduction related to the Incarnation). Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind" (**John 9:39**). Some Pharisees overheard this and, taking offence, asked, "What? Are we blind too?" (**John 9:40**).

Jesus replied, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep" (**John 9:41 – 10:2**).

Jesus was boldly declaring He is the only way to salvation and to the fullness of life. The thief is the one who steals and in context any teacher who claims there are different ways to salvation is a false teacher, who is stealing or robbing people of the truth. That is why the thief comes in through other ways, not through the gate (Jesus), but through different ways i.e. over the wall. The end result is, the thief is there only to steal, not to offer life but to kill and destroy says Jesus. There is no other way to be saved. This is the context, Jesus offers life, eternal life and a life of peace with God in this world which is a great blessing. How many today are in search of the peace of God and fail to find it? They have been cheated and robbed by the thieves of the world systems and false teachers.

The Good Shepherd

The Good shepherd is what makes the difference in the life of the sheep who follow Jesus. The Good Shepherd knows His sheep, those who belong to Him, He knows each of them by name, He knows their families and where we are at all times. He knows our circumstances, our history, what we are like, our characters, personalities and our weaknesses.

Jesus knows His sheep individually and calls us by name. As he is the Good Shepherd He knows if we are missing or in danger. Do we truly know just how much we are loved by The Good Shepherd, because we belong to Him, we are His and He loves His own. Does this thought not fill your heart with joy? The Psalmist says the Good Shepherd leads His

flock to green pastures and still waters, providing for their needs as He cares for their going out and their returning home. Not one will be missing from the care and attention of Our Lord.

The question is do we know the Good Shepherd?

When a shepherd reaches a town he has an opportunity to leave his sheep in a communal pen, in the safety of the town along with the other sheep. The next morning each shepherd gathers at the pen and calls forth their own sheep. The sheep will not follow a stranger but recognise their shepherds voice. They trust him and come out to follow him. There is a beautiful image in this, a good shepherd knows his sheep by name, 'Come on Patch'. 'Dopey are you awake?' 'Limpy, don't worry, we wont leave you behind'. This is a beautiful image of the Good Shepherd as even the lame, crippled, blind or infirm, our Lord does not despise nor will ever leave behind.

What makes the difference between a Good Shepherd and a hired hand? Jesus tells us a hired hand will lead the sheep up to a point but when faced with danger they will abandon the sheep (**John 10:13**). The Good Shepherd however not only ensures all of the sheep are accounted for, but will defend them with His dying breath. Jesus demonstrated this on a cross of wood at Calvary (**John 10:15**), even rescuing a lost sheep crucified beside Him saying, 'Today you will be with me in paradise'. To think Jesus would still have gone to the cross of wood, had this lost sheep been the only one that was lost! That is a remarkable testimony to the love and courageousness of Christ the Good Shepherd.

God's elect

Those of you who are His sheep, in His fold, do you realise you have been chosen since before the foundations of the world were laid? Jesus says, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (**John 10:16**). This means we have a part to play along with the Good Shepherd in reaching out to the lost sheep of this world.

In a world with many competing voices can we distinguish the voice of the Good Shepherd from the myriad of voices around us telling us this is the way we must follow? Only Jesus leads to life in all fulness, other voices will lead us astray and have no eternal benefit.

Summary

The question I asked at the start of this sermon was how would someone describe your style of following Jesus? Would they say a lukewarm, half hearted, non committed approach. A rebellious sheep who only follows occasionally when its convenient? Or would they describe you as a follower of Jesus with all of your heart. We are called to be effective followers of Jesus, meaning we are actively engaged in the work of following obediently the ways Jesus has set down for us. The world is filled with passive sheep who take no responsibility nor care how their lives impact the lives of others as to their eternal state! If we are truly His we need to consider the way we are following Jesus because our example will have an impact upon others and how they should also follow. Jesus is not a hobby, an add on when convenient but is the King of Heaven and therefore our following Jesus should set our walk different to the world.

Make sure the Christ we are following is the Christ of the Scriptures and not one of our own making, then we will recognise His voice and discern the voice that belongs to the Good Shepherd and avoid the false who only come to steal and destroy. Do I follow obediently, loyally, diligently, fervently or passively, non committed and half hearted?