Good Shepherd Sunday

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Good Shepherd Sunday C: Acts 9 36-43, Ps 23, Rev 7 9-17, Jn 10 22-30

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. The image of the Lord as the Good Shepherd is one of the most treasured in our tradition. It expresses God's commitment to stand by us no matter what. The Good Shepherd is our nurturer – the one who feeds us; the one we cry out to when we're feeling threatened or betrayed – or when we're overwhelmed by grief or loneliness. This is the shepherd we meet in Psalm 23 today, and equally in Isaiah 40 – *He shall feed his flock like a shepherd and gather the lambs in his arms*.

But there's a shadow side to this. The two other major prophets, Jeremiah [2.8, 12.10, 23.1-4, 50.6] and Ezekiel [34.2-16] cry out against false shepherds of God's people – priests who betray their positions of trust; who, instead of guiding their flock in the right paths, abandon them to danger; who, instead of feeding God's flock, eat them alive. These prophets give voice to God's disgust at any who take on the role of shepherd of the people only to use it for their own self-gratification. We are hearing this voice again today crying out against a church which is inexcusably guilty of protecting false shepherds and turning a blind eye to abuse they have perpetrated.

This contrast between the Good Shepherd and false shepherds is in front of us again this morning in our reading from the Gospel of John. In John Ch. 10, where we find the *Good Shepherd Discourse*, Jesus is revealed as the model shepherd. I say model because the example of Jesus's own words and actions and priorities calls us as the Church to pull together and work for the care and nurture of God's little ones too.

John the Evangelist does what the prophets did before him; he weaves the Good Shepherd image in with a contrasting image of bad shepherds to emphasise his message. The Good Shepherd Discourse comes after the story of Jesus healing a man who was born blind. In that story, the Pharisees reject the person who was healed and they reject Jesus as a healer.

The Pharisees are some of the *official* shepherds of God's people – but for John the Evangelist, they stand in the tradition of the blind, bad shepherds that the prophets warned against. Even though they have testimony from the man's parents that he was born blind, they tell the man that Jesus cannot be from God. John is effectively asking, Who is so blind that they would reject the healing itself as a lie?

After the *Good Shepherd Discourse,* these official shepherds are back on the scene again, grilling Jesus, rejecting what he says, trying unsuccessfully to stone him, and then to arrest him. Jesus escapes from them. And the next thing we know, he's calling one of his sheep, Lazarus, to come out of the grave. Jesus said 'My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life … no one will snatch them out of my hand.' And Lazarus came out. That's some shepherd!

So there's the contrast – the Good Shepherd and the false shepherds. We are well warned about false shepherds. And you don't have to look far to find them. There are many in our world – many in governments, in major organizations; many individuals who abuse vulnerable people, or who neglect to help them. And as we know, most shockingly, there are also false shepherds in the Church. The experience of the prophets and the story about the man born blind that John put alongside the Good Shepherd Discourse tell us that this is nothing new.

So what help does John give us – where should our focus be?

Jesus tells his opponents that his actions speak so loudly that anyone should be able to hear – *The works that I do in my*

Father's name testify to me. And yet they still wouldn't believe. But others did — *My sheep hear my voice … and they follow me*.

When I was growing up, the great question was whether the miracles of Jesus literally happened or not. John the Evangelist asks a different question. John asks if we can hear what the works of Jesus actually say. Actions speak louder than words. Jesus's actions are his voice; his actions tell us what he's saying. If the Word of God became flesh, then what that physical Word *does* is saying something to us.

And just before the words about the Good Shepherd, the Word of God acted out of compassion for a person who had suffered from blindness all his life. What do we hear in that?

I hear that God cares for me when I suffer — cares for you;

I hear that God cares particularly for people like the one born blind;

I hear in this care the cries of the prophets who were saying all along that God cares particularly for the sick, the hungry, the poor, the lonely, the oppressed;

And then I remember the Prophets' angry words — the words those prophets flung at people who showed no care to God's little ones — and even worse words for those who cheated or oppressed the vulnerable;

And then I begin to hear a call — a call to me to listen to my own words. Are the words I speak in tune with the words of Jesus? Do I hear him that clearly? Do I recognise what he says — what his words in action are saying — and do I respond by following him through imitation of his example?

Because a middle-eastern shepherd leads the flock, and we follow; we tread in the footsteps of the shepherd.

And if we do, the love of Christ is proclaimed.

Three practical outworkings of this to ponder:

In the big picture, the Church — the Body of Christ — is called to be the Good Shepherd: we are to make sure this is true

In this time of election campaigning, we are to listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd: we are called to ignore other voices

And in this time of ecological peril, we are to remember our commissioning as Earth's shepherds, and we are to measure our words by our actions.