

Today I'd like to look at the section from the end of our gospel reading, verses 14 through to 18 looking at the three main topics that I see coming through.

The first is from verses 14 and 15. "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". There's probably enough in just these 2 verses to fill a sermon so I'll try to keep it brief.

I am the good shepherd. Jesus has just been criticising the Pharisees saying that they are not true shepherds. From the Old Testament, the leaders of the people were identified as their shepherds but Jesus is saying that they abused that privilege. According to Jesus, these people were either thieves and robbers at worst, out to steal and kill and destroy (v10) or had no real care for the people they were supposed to be leading and left them on their own when trouble appeared. Jesus however is saying that he is the best example of a shepherd, the one that all other leaders should aim to be.

My first thought when I think of an example of a good shepherd has to be Psalm 23.

The Lord is my shepherd;  
I shall not want.  
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;  
He leads me beside the still waters.  
He restores my soul;  
He leads me in the paths of righteousness  
For His name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil;  
For You are with me;  
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

This is the image of someone that cares and does the best for those under his care. This is what Jesus is saying he is like. His priority is to make sure that his sheep are cared for and kept safe.

His sheep, knowing this know that they don't have to fear anything. Using Jesus' analogy, even if a bear or wolf appears they can be sure that their shepherd will take care of them because to their shepherd they are more important than his own life.

But it goes further than that. Not only is he a shepherd that will do everything for his sheep, he goes on to say that he knows us and we know him. Not just a vague knowledge, but as closely as Jesus and the Father know each other. Jesus and the Father, who have been together since the beginning of time. We are not called to a faith of theoretical knowledge, we are called to a faith of relationship. We are called to know Jesus as a person, as a friend, as a brother. We are called to be known.

That is an amazing thought.

The second topic I see is from verse 16. "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."

This is more of a challenge to me though I have cause to be thankful. Jesus is speaking to the Jews as he says that there are others to be brought into the flock. If it wasn't for this, then I wouldn't have had a chance to come to know Jesus myself. As a non-Jew, I am from another sheepfold. However, there is also a challenge.

Jesus says that there will be one flock and one shepherd. That means that all Christians will be united under Jesus. So the question is how do I feel about this? Can I feel part of the same flock with someone that prefers High Church services, bells and smells as it is sometimes known? Can I feel part of the same flock as someone that delights in 3 hours services with hour long sermons and songs sung what feels like a dozen times, accompanied by a rock band, with long extemporised sections in the middle? Can I feel part of the same flock as someone that finds God in the quiet setting of a Taize service or monastery? Can I feel part of the same flock with the person that sits behind me and mutters throughout the service?

However hard it is, the answer to all of these needs to be yes. We are called to be part of the one flock under Jesus. We are not necessarily required to enjoy the same things, we are not required to want to go to the same services, we are not even required to *like* each other. We are though required to accept each other as members of the same flock with the same shepherd.

Finally, we come to the third topic. The cost to Jesus of bringing this flock together into a relationship with him. Verse 15 says "I lay down my life for the sheep". Jesus knew what bringing together his one flock was going to cost him, but he came anyway.

Despite what the Jews of the time thought, it was not them that took Jesus' life that first Good Friday. Jesus shows in the final part of this chapter that they could not kill him when he wasn't ready. Twice in the remainder of the chapter the people are ready to stone him to death but Jesus escaped their grasp. When the time was right, Jesus willingly gave up his life. Yes, he knew that he would rise again, but he had to be willing to make the sacrifice in the first place.

It was not easy either. Research has revealed just how painful death by crucifixion is. The story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane shows that Jesus didn't really want to suffer and die. But, for the sake of his sheep, to protect them and save them, he went through with it.

So, to summarise as we finish.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the one that knows each and every member of his flock, that cares more for his flock than his own life and that takes the best possible care of them.

The flock that Jesus cares for is not exclusively "ours". His flock covers the whole world and includes everyone that knows him as Saviour.

And Jesus demonstrated that he is the Good Shepherd because he did, willingly, lay down his life for his sheep.

So let's rejoice in our relationship with the Good Shepherd and do our best to maintain the unity of the flock.