

READING: Acts 4.5-12

The Jewish rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.

This Jesus is

"the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
it has become the cornerstone."

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.'

GOSPEL: John 10.11-18

Jesus said to the Pharisees: 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

I saw Jesus in Beeston the other day. I did. I wasn't having some sort of inspired vision or anything. I was sitting outside Bistro 66, watching the world go by. And I saw a homeless guy opposite, sat on the ground, wrapped in a blanket. Sadly, not particularly unusual these days. Then, along came a young lad, a spring in his step, bouncing along at full speed, and when he got to the homeless guy he stopped. Hi how are you doing? He asked. Big beaming smile all over his face. It's good to see you. They shook hands and then the young man sat on the ground with him. And they talked, with great animation. I wasn't close enough to hear their conversation, but I could see the body language. Open, friendly, warm. It looked like friendship to me. I could see the homeless guy immediately smile and he looked energized; interested in life again for short while.

So where did I see Jesus? I'm just going to leave that question hanging for a while.

Today we hear Jesus describe himself as the Good Shepherd. So let's unpack that a little bit.

Now you may have heard that ancient Middle Eastern shepherding doesn't really look like our present day experience of rounding sheep up and driving them into a pen. Apparently they walked in front, calling their sheep to follow.

But when I picture Jesus as a shepherd, I don't imagine him either striding out in front expecting the sheep to catch up, or forcing them along from behind. I picture Jesus walking with the flock, talking to them even if they don't understand, knowing where they all are, and which ones are feeling tired and a bit frail, in need of a carry. His attention is on the sheep. He is focused on getting the flock to a place where they can be safe and nurtured. And do you know what? I think the parable of the lost sheep doesn't make any sense at all unless it was extremely unlikely for one to go missing. The shepherd knew the sheep and the sheep knew the shepherd and trusted him.

When Jesus uses this image of a good shepherd to describe himself, he is drawing on a wealth of material in the Hebrew Scriptures. It's quite deliberate and would have been uncomfortable for some of his hearers. Jesus would have known Psalm 23, which we have just sung. The Lord is my Shepherd. God is the shepherd. He would have known many other passages where God is known as shepherd.

He would also have been aware of passages where the leaders of Israel are referred to as shepherds. Shepherds were patriarchs and kings; advisors and politicians; priests and teachers. People with

responsibility for the nation. People with power. And the ancient prophets delivered stinging rebukes when the shepherds failed the people they were responsible for.

There are so many passages I could have picked to demonstrate this, but just listen to the kind of language the prophet Ezekiel uses.

The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. I will seek the lost and I will

bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.

I love Ezekiel. He can be a bit weird, but he doesn't pull any punches!

So when Jesus says I am the Good Shepherd, what is he actually saying? It's not just that he is basically referring to himself as God; it's also an attack on the shepherds of the people: The political and religious leaders. The ones out to feed themselves, not the sheep; more concerned with their own comfort and safety than protecting and providing for the people. If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, it really begs the question; who are the bad shepherds?

We often think of this passage as a nice reassuring cosy passage, and together with Psalm 23 it tends to be received that way. Aw, Jesus is the good shepherd. Isn't that nice?! Isn't he lovely? Yes, Jesus is altogether amazing and wonderful. But thinking of Jesus as the good shepherd is also deeply challenging; especially for those of us who are in any kind of leadership: whether that's in family life, church, or in the wider world.

Shepherding Jesus style is sacrificial. It means you are more concerned about the sheep in your care, than yourself. And it is completely at odds with how leadership is commonly demonstrated in our world, and, sadly, often, also in the church.

We live in a world where celebrity culture is huge. People are judged in terms of numbers of likes, followers, fame, wealth, power, and influence. It's even a career now; 'influencer'. We put people on pedestals. We prefer politicians who make big promises to magically make things better, and shy away from those who do the actual boring hard graft for people. We want shiny, exciting superheroes in charge.

And the shepherds believe the hype. They think they are special. And they act like the rules don't apply to them. They have privilege and power over others. But it doesn't look like Jesus.

When I think of all the people who have been damaged by church, many with deep lifelong trauma, I see a pattern. I see leaders who have power and influence, while the stories of the powerless are dismissed. I see people who are more concerned with their reputation

than protecting the sheep. I see hired hands who really don't care, as long as they get rich. I see celebrity culture sneak into the church, so that success is more valued than faithfulness. I see bad shepherds. And it's a challenge for us all, because we all have influence to some degree.

Yes, Jesus is the Good Shepherd, but he's also the Lamb of God led to the slaughter. When he walked the earth he became a victim of bad shepherds. Jesus stands with the victims. Lamb of God, we'll sing soon. Have mercy on us. Like Jesus, we are shepherds; and we are also sheep.

I want to say something loud and clear. I need you to hear this. Don't put any church leader on a pedestal. We are weak enough to enjoy it, and unbalanced enough to fall off. That doesn't mean we don't need you to affirm and encourage us, but you need to understand that we don't have a hotline to God any more than you. We get stuff wrong, and we need the gift of repentance and forgiveness frequently.

Those of us who preach are not wiser than the rest of you. We might know a little bit more than some of you, but then some of you know a lot more than us!

(You know who you are!) If I preach, I preach because I'm a bit gobby and like saying stuff out loud. And I'm a bit of a show-off. Peter was gobby, good at public speaking, but he was far from perfect. Yes God can speak through what we say, but that's never a given, because we are human beings, not God.

There's a really important word around now, that we probably didn't use much 20 or 30 years ago.

Safeguarding. It's not a popular word, but it is significant. And it's deeply connected with following Jesus; living like Jesus; caring like Jesus; leading like Jesus; holding our power and influence lightly and using it in good ways. Most importantly, it's about protecting the sheep, the vulnerable, whatever the personal cost. Safeguarding is part of discipleship. It's core to the concept of a good shepherd. It's so much more than just an irritating bureaucratic hoop we have to jump through.

I saw Jesus in Beeston the other day. I saw someone vulnerable, lost, and hurting. I saw a victim of bad shepherding. I saw the Lamb of God.

I saw a young man sit with him in the dirt; and I saw the Good Shepherd.