

“I am the good shepherd”; “I am the gate for the sheep” (John 10: 7, 11).

What do you know about sheep?

One thing we know is that sheep are followers. As a result, farmers have to employ shepherds to watch that their silly sheep don't follow each other into danger.

What do you know about shepherds?

We don't see them very often in South Africa, but in the past this was the job of young boys (like Nelson Mandela). It was their job to take the sheep to a place where they could graze and where the sheep were not liable to wander too far away. And then the group of boys could spend their time in games and competitions, keeping one eye on the sheep. If they lost one, they knew they would be in trouble. Today, we seldom see shepherds. The land is so flat that the shepherd will be able to see the sheep from where he lies under thorn trees and fences prevent his sheep from wandering too far. The shepherd only has to get busy again in the evening when he must drive them back in the direction of the kraal, checking that even the slowest animal keeps moving in the right direction.

The land God gave to his people long ago was much smaller than S.A. and didn't have wide open plains where sheep could graze. Instead there were rocky hillsides and unfenced steep cliffs. Yet, many people kept sheep – mainly for their wool. In those days shepherds had to be much more active and involved with their sheep.

Because they spent so much time watching them, in Bible times the shepherds got to know the sheep individually, recognising them from their markings and noticing their individual habits eg which ones always walked slowly or which ones liked a particular type of grass best. They even gave them nicknames! Then, when it was time to bring them home, a shepherd in Palestine didn't walk behind the sheep and drive them, as our shepherds do. He went in front, checking that the path was safe for the animals. As he walked, he called or sang. The sheep got to know his voice and so they followed him.

Once they got to the sheepfold or kraal the shepherd led them in, checking that they were all there. But that wasn't the end of his work shift! Unless the sheep were safe in the village sheep kraal where others would watch over them, the shepherd would spend the night with the animals. He would lie down at the entrance to the sheepfold like a door so no wild animals could come and grab some supper! This also meant that no thief could get in and steal any of the flock.

Because there were always shepherds around – often nearby -the Bible is full of references to sheep. King David used to be a shepherd before he was chosen to be king and he wrote lots of poems about God and his people. In the book of Psalms we often find comments that God is like a 'shepherd' and that his people are his 'flock'. Probably the best known poem is Psalm 23 where David says: "The Lord is my shepherd."

Many of the prophets who brought God's messages to his people also used word pictures about sheep. They talked about bad shepherds who led people away from God when they should have been teaching them to follow him or bad shepherds who were more concerned about themselves than their flock and so didn't look after their sheep properly. But the prophets also explained to God's people that God cared for his flock like a shepherd.

Years later when he came to earth, Jesus also words like this. It is very possible that, as he spoke to the people who followed him, they could see shepherds and sheep in the distance. Some of them might even have been shepherds in their young days! The people listening to him had grown up hearing the verses from the O.T. about sheep as these verses were read out aloud in their synagogues. This meant that, although David, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had lived long before Jesus, the people in his day knew those words too. And they knew what being a shepherd entailed.

So Jesus told them the story about the shepherd who made sure all his sheep were safe. This shepherd counted his sheep into the kraal and noticed that one out of the 100 was missing. The other 99 were safe in the kraal. It was late in the day by this time and the shepherd was probably tired, but all he could think about was that the sheep might be in danger. So he set out, back the way he had come, calling out and whistling for the lost sheep. Eventually he heard a faint bleating – and there was his lost lamb, stuck in a thorn bush or with one leg pinned in a crack in the rocks. He was thrilled! The lamb was too exhausted to walk so, even though he was tired himself, the shepherd carried it on his shoulders all the way home. When he got there his family and neighbours were as thrilled as he was that he and the sheep were safe – and so the whole village celebrated together.

Jesus wanted people to realise that he cared for them just as much as that shepherd cared for his sheep. He wanted them to know that he celebrates when he rescues us from evil. That's why he describes himself as 'The Good Shepherd' (John 10:11). As he said this, the people probably nodded. They knew that Jesus was telling them that, like God, he would lead them into good places and he would protect them and guard them.

But Jesus didn't stop there. He reminded them that a good shepherd is prepared to die to rescue his sheep. Jesus explained that he was going to die to rescue his people, his sheep. The people didn't really want to hear that. They didn't want him to die; they wanted him to lead them so I suspect they heard only part of what he was saying.

It was only later that they realised that, through dying, this shepherd was making sure that his sheep weren't left alone ever. Jesus beat death to rescue his flock from death. But a shepherd cannot protect stubborn sheep who don't follow his voice. We have to learn to identify his voice amidst all the others which shout in our ears. This is why we want you to come to Sunday School, to read your Bibles, to listen to our pastors. Then we shall discover that Jesus is the one whose words lead us lovingly into good places, green pastures where we can feel his love.