

Sunday School Notes for 12 March: John 10, Matthew 18:12 &13

The Bible tells us that when people started to farm, they realized that it was difficult for them to get enough grass to feed their sheep so they chose men to spend time with the sheep, to lead them from place to place and to watch that they didn't come to any harm. It must have been a lonely life out in the hills – just sheep around one. Even today being a shepherd is a lonely life – days can go by when they don't meet anybody. No TV, no news about what is happening in the world. Maybe some now have a phone, but in some places phones won't work.

In Jesus' day sometimes shepherds got together at night to help each other to take care of the animals. (Think of the Christmas shepherds.) The sheep were herded into sheepfolds built up in the hills – rough stone circles with a single opening but no gate. Instead the shepherd simply lay down in the gateway and nothing could get past him without waking him – no thief, no wild animal. Thus, the shepherd was constantly 'on duty', watching out for the sheep he guarded. He was even prepared to die for the sheep if need be.

Shepherds were probably smelly and were certainly despised (see Gen 46:34). They were used to hunting for their own food and to defending their sheep physically. They were strong enough to help at lambing time and with shearing. Yet they were gentle enough to look after the lambs. So, when Jesus goes on to describe himself as the good shepherd he is not claiming to be a nice, smiley guy, but a leader – tough but dependable, totally concerned about the survival of his sheep. The story told in Matthew 18 makes this clear. In that short story Jesus describes how the shepherd arrives at the kraal, counts his sheep and discovers one is missing so he sets off in the growing darkness (no chance for supper first!) into the hills again to search for the animal. When he finds it he celebrates because the sheep is safe.

The job of shepherd was so well-known, that the word was used to describe how the leaders were meant to look after the people. Sadly many of them didn't do that and God had some pretty tough things to say to them about just looking out for themselves. (See Jeremiah 23 and Ezekiel 34) 'Shepherds' like those led the people astray. They scattered them and drove them away from God. However, Jesus proved over and over again that he is a real shepherd leader. He cares for his people and will not lead them astray.

Like a good shepherd, Jesus has a close relationship with his sheep. He knows them by name and they know him. Like the middle-eastern shepherd, he will go out in front of his flock leading them to the 'quiet waters' and 'green pastures' (Ps 23). His listeners knew their Scriptures and would have worked out that when he called himself the good shepherd, he was hinting that he was the one chosen by God (the Christ or Messiah) who would come (see Isa 40:11) to rescue God's people.

Of course, this means that people are being described as sheep - not a very flattering picture! But like sheep, we wander off unless we have a leader showing us the way. In fact perhaps we are worse than sheep, for we have forgotten to listen to God's voice. But Jesus also refers to himself as a lamb, knowing that he will be sacrificed to save his 'sheep'.

So Jesus is the security for his sheep, the guardian of his flock and the sacrificial lamb. This sums up what he does for us. But often we are still as stupid as a flock of sheep for we do not register that he offers us the best (the abundance) in life. Instead we scout around on our own looking for better nibbles and risking danger – thinking we are fine although we are badly at risk. Jesus wants to give us the very best of everything – safety, security, provisions.

Wonderfully Jesus ends this passage with the promise that there are many others who he will bring into his flock of sheep – So his promise includes you and me in 2023 in a corner of Africa far from the hills of Israel. If we join his flock and love him, he will look after us and be our shepherd.