

# 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2009 Sermon

## ‘The Good Shepherd’

**Acts 4:5-12**

**John 10:11-18**

If there was one animal that biblical passages use to describe us more than any other...what would it be...?

You know the animal most-often employed as an illustration of people: sheep.

Why does the Bible constantly use sheep to describe us?

I don't profess to know much about agriculture at all. When I undertook some supply ministry work during my training around the rural parishes of Central Otago, I can assure you my ignorance of farming was well-exposed! I'm a convicted, espresso-sipping townie.

But what I do know is that sheep are stupid. Well, maybe not stupid, but very, very nervous. I guess that extreme nervousness can be mistaken as stupidity at times.

They get all freaked-out by the smallest things. They blindly follow each other around, without thinking for themselves. They have those little geeky legs that don't bend properly. They keep saying the same thing... Baaa!

There was this guy called Ken who grew up on a farm, and on his family's farm they had a sheep called Herman.

Herman had been a pet sheep, because his mother had died when he was born. Pet sheep are more weird than even normal sheep. Herman was not fenced like the other sheep and so he would wander around the farm. And one day Ken saw Herman coming alongside the side of the barn, and so Ken hid around the corner and when Herman wandered around the corner Ken leapt out and shouted "Boo!"

Herman dropped dead, there and then. He was literally scared to death. The funniest part of this tragic story is that Ken's Dad didn't believe that that was how Herman died.

Ken was saying that years later, grown up and with his own family, his elderly parents came and stayed with them for Christmas. After the Christmas dinner Ken's dad came out into the kitchen and said to him: "You know it's great to be here. You've done so well, you've got a

wonderful family who share so much love together. I'm proud to be your father."

As this grown father and son separated from their warm hug, he looked at his son and said: "Ken, what really happened to Herman?"

So, it seems unfortunate to me that the Bible insists on referring to us as sheep.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus identifies himself as the shepherd – the Good Shepherd. By implication, once again, we are the sheep.

It's very easy to over-extend this metaphor, especially with the various references to different parties in this reading. But it's really very simple, I think:

In saying he is the Good (or noble) Shepherd, Jesus is telling us something about his identity.

This passage is one of the famous 'I Am' statements of Jesus. Jesus' preface 'I Am' is a powerful clue to his identity. When the Jewish audiences hear 'I Am', who do they think of?

YAHWEH, the Mighty God of Israel when asked by Moses for his name, says "I Am who I Am." (Exodus 3:14)

This self-association by Jesus with the God of Israel is so strong it's regarded by many at the time as blasphemous.

*"I Am the Good Shepherd"*.

Jesus locks-in his connection with God the Father even further: *"the Father knows me and I know the Father"*.

It's not just a connection, it's an intimate relationship Jesus shares with the Father: *"the Father loves me"*.

This point is important. It not only identifies who Jesus is, it signals the relationship Jesus is sharing with us all. The intimate connection Jesus has with the God of Israel, is one enabled for all of us, through Jesus.

There's a lot of truth in the cliché: 'It's not what you know, it's who you know.'

The love of God is made available to us through Jesus, the Good Shepherd. And the demonstration of this love...? Jesus says no less than five times here that he lays his life down for the sheep (that's us remember).

This only makes sense in the light of the claims that Jesus' Easter death on the cross brings life. A literal shepherd who lays down his life wouldn't be helping his sheep at all; any predators would simply slaughter the sheep, completely unimpeded.

The bizarre paradox at the heart of Christianity is exactly what Peter and John proclaim in the reading from Acts.

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

*<sup>12</sup>There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved"*

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who demonstrates the love of God by laying down his life for us – the sheep.

'Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so...'

I once heard someone preaching who said that the Bible never once says that Jesus loves me. While that may be the literal case...here Jesus is saying "I love you":

*"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep."*

This is a prime example of where in the Bible Jesus is saying he loves you.

This may seem obvious but I know God really wants us to hear this today.

This week there has been a storm of fear, both here and all around the world.

This swine flu (H1-N1) that is spreading from Mexico is not a distant threat, it's here in New Zealand.

We may fear terrorism, but, despite its terrible affects, terrorism is something that happens overseas. It's not on our soil, on our whenua.

In less than a week global attention has turned to New Zealand as one of the first countries to confirm cases of this flu virus. And the fear and anxiety as a result is palpable.

I've mentioned terrorism. And fear of global recession has been building in recent months. The potential implications of a pandemic have been thrust upon us this week and this is causing a reaction of fear.

We are sheep.

I'm not suggesting we shouldn't take this situation seriously.

We should take reasonable precautions.

We should quarantine the virus.

We should develop and use drugs in response to this new strain.

But even if that all fails...(and it shouldn't; that's not what the experts are saying)...but if this flu has tragic consequence like it is overseas, we are reminded that Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

The Good Shepherd has shown us God's love, by laying down his own life.

Jesus gives himself,

not just for each one of us,

not just to heal the lame man in Jerusalem,

but to secure God's plan of salvation for the whole world.

We don't know what that will look like,  
we struggle to trust that God has things in hand,  
but the hope that comes from God's raising Jesus from death is that  
history is heading toward a goal, a 'telos'.

The one who was rejected by his contemporaries, has been raised by God.  
The loser has become the winner – not for his own sake but for ours.

This is what Peter and John are witnesses to.

Standing before their powerful enemies;

standing in the temple as prisoners;

standing there in chains awaiting their fate...

Peter speaks scandalous words of hope:

*“<sup>10</sup>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.”*

What fearlessness Peter shows!

“Don’t take this personally... but this healing has happened in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified ....but whom **God** has raised from the dead.”

Peter witnesses to this enduring truth (for all the sheep of history) by the power of the Holy Spirit – the power of the Spirit of Christ – the Good Shepherd.

That’s the only one in whom we dare ever place our full and certain hope.

For by doing so God enables us to deny the power and lies of our enemies,

to refuse to bow to threats of death

to shrug off the grip of fear that threatens to paralyse us.

We have a Good Shepherd.

A Good Shepherd who shows us the love of God and promises us that we are saved in him.

Let us live in the life-giving truth of Christ.

Let us cast off fear.

Let us pray, in the name of Christ, for those who suffer –  
from flu,

or from terrorism,

or from poverty,

or from hunger... from whatever the world throws at them.

Jesus love me still today,  
walking with me on my way,  
wanting as a friend to give  
light and love to all who live.

Jesus says: “**I Am** the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:25)

Thanks be to God. Amen.