

**The Good Shepherd is a very popular image for OT writers** to describe the relationship between God and his people. We all know the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm but similar imagery occurs in other Psalms notably 77, 79, 80, 95 & 100 where the Messiah is described as a shepherd. But not only the psalmist but also Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel also speak of God as the Shepherd and Israel as His flock.

**Jesus the Good Shepherd** – See the parable of the lost sheep Matt 18 & Luke 15. Jesus also speaks of the people as sheep without a shepherd. Matt 9 & Mark 6. Or the sheep being scattered when shepherd is killed Mark 14 & Matt 26. And there is the well known blessing from the end of Hebrews ... 'our Lord Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep.....'

**Does the imagery which was once so potent still hold good for us?** There are two problems for people today:

1. In Jesus' day the shepherd was a familiar figure to most. His was a pastoral society and sheep were very important to the economy. Today most people in the western world live in towns and cities (about 85%) and rarely see a sheep and many have never met or seen a real shepherd (except possibly on TV). If you look over the churchyard wall today you will see several ewes and their lambs but have you ever seen the shepherd? You might be surprised to know the shepherd visits them every day to check on their health to see they have water and adequate grass, yes and also to count them! Being a shepherd today is still a very demanding job both in time and vigilance.

2. I think there is also another problem which we, in the church, often overlook. Sheep are very simple creatures with very little in the way of a brain. They are often thought of as stupid and sometimes perverse creatures. The gulf in intelligence between these creatures and man is enormous! As an illustration of the gap between God and mankind that may serve us well. However, over the centuries Christian leaders have appropriated the title 'shepherd' to themselves or at least to their leaders and ministers. Bishops carry their croziers, symbolic replicas of the shepherd's crook, and parish clergy often speak of 'their flock'. Some years ago I was at a church function when I overheard the recently appointed vicar say petulantly when he wasn't getting his own way over some issue 'they need to learn to hear the shepherd's voice'. To which a senior member standing near by remarked 'Oh they hear The Shepherd's voice, it's yours they have trouble with vicar!' People can be made to feel very patronized. It is often the case that rank-and-file Christians are just as intelligent and sometimes, more spiritual aware than their leaders. The image of the shepherd and his flock simply doesn't work for many people now!

**So what are we to do?** For my part I would like to us return to Jesus' teaching and focus on the one and only true 'Shepherd' – Jesus Christ – for this is what Jesus taught his disciples; that we are all sheep and there is only one Shepherd and way into the fold. We can emulate the qualities of the shepherd; vigilance, courage, patience and unstinting love for his flock. There have been many examples of individuals exercising pastoral care for their neighbours during the pandemic. But I believe we should always remember that we are not the SHEPHERD but we are his assistants in

his task. Even at the end of John's Gospel, on the beach, when Peter is being reconciled to Jesus, Jesus' final words to Peter are “Feed **my** sheep”. Note **my sheep not yours**. We are sent out, that is what the word apostle means, to proclaim the Good News and draw others to Christ who alone is the Good Shepherd.

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