

JOHN 10.1-18, 27-29: THE LOVE OF THE SAVIOUR

[Chelmsford: 3 April 2011]

“Business leaders today are only in it for the quick buck. Once people were really concerned about doing something worthwhile, about building up a business, about looking after their workers. They would hope that their children would carry on the business after them, and go on contributing to the well-being of the local community. Now they don't care. They can close a factory in one town and open another a 100 miles away. As long as they get their bonus and share options, they don't worry about anything else”. True or false?

One thing for certain: Jesus never came to this world to make a quick buck for himself. Jesus came to give, not to get. Jesus came to live and serve with our interests alone in mind. Jesus came because he loved us and wanted the very best for us.

This is the context in which we need to hear the words of Jesus: **“I am the good shepherd”** (John 10.11,14).

Do notice, Jesus does not claim to be just any old shepherd, but rather to be **“the good shepherd”**. Jesus was clearly setting himself up as better than others.

Indeed, in the context of John 10 Jesus was making a contrast between himself and three others: *the stranger*, the *thief* and the *hired man*.

This morning I propose to examine the 'goodness' of Jesus over against these three figures, and then draw a parallel with one other figure. In doing so we shall quickly discover that *Jesus is 'goodness' itself*.

1. UNLIKE THE STRANGER JESUS KNOWS HIS SHEEP

Jesus begins the parable here in John 10 by picturing a shepherd leading out his flock: **“The sheep hear his voice as he calls his own sheep by name, and he leads them out. When he has brought them out, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follows him, because they know his voice. They will not follow someone else; instead, they will run away from such a person, because they do not know his voice”** (vv3-5)

Unlike a stranger, Jesus knows his sheep - he knows them intimately.

The same thought is found in v14: **“I am the good shepherd... I know my sheep and they know me”**. Similarly in v27: **“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them”**. The goodness of Jesus is to be found in his knowledge of his sheep.

To fully appreciate the imagery, we have to remember that in the time of Jesus sheep were kept not for their mutton, but for their wool.

Whereas today most sheep live only a brief life before they are slaughtered for their meat, in Palestine sheep used to be looked after by a shepherd for many years.

Shepherds would therefore meaningfully get to know their sheep, and the sheep their shepherds. Jesus was not exaggerating when he said that the sheep could know the voice of their shepherd.

Let me quote from George Adam Smith, a former observer of Palestinian life:

"Sometimes we enjoyed our noonday rest beside one of those Judean wells, to which three of four shepherds came down with their blocks. The flocks mixed with each other, & we wondered how each shepherd would get his own again. But after the watering & the playing were over, the shepherds one by one went up different sides of the valley and each called out his peculiar call; and the sheep drew out of the crowd to their own shepherd, and the flocks passed as orderly as they came"

The sheep knew their shepherd. What's more, the shepherd knew his sheep: **"I am the good shepherd... I know my sheep"** (vv14,15). Indeed, he knows our names.

The good shepherd, Jesus says, **"calls his own sheep by name"** (v3)

What a wonderful thought: Jesus knows us - he knows each one of us by name.

It doesn't matter how many billions of people there may be inhabiting this planet, Jesus knows each one of us, his people

Today's bureaucrats can only distinguish amongst us by numbers: e.g. the income tax authorities are more interested in our number than our name; when it comes to claiming on my insurance, the person at the other end of the phone wants to know my policy number, and not my name.

In today's world it is increasingly difficult to remain a person

The story is told of how a census taker once asked a woman how many children she had. She began by saying: *"Let's see, there are Sally, Jimmy, Bob..."* The census taker said: *"No, no, don't give me the names, just give me the numbers"*

But in God's sight we are never numbers, we are always names - we are always persons

Jesus, the Good Shepherd knows us.

Remember, that Jesus was speaking within a Jewish context.

For Jews knowledge always implied far more than head-knowledge, it embraced 'heart-knowledge' in the sense that it involved a relationship.

For Jesus to know us means that he enters into a relationship with us - and we with him. He doesn't simply know about us - he knows us as people.

What a wonderful sense of assurance this gives us, when things get difficult.

My mind goes to some words of God found in Isaiah 43.1: **"Do not be afraid - I will save you. I have called you by name - you are mine"**.

When we are up against it, when there is nobody with whom we can share our innermost feelings, when there is nobody who seems to understand us, remember that God knows and understands. And because he knows and understands, he cares.

2. UNLIKE THE THIEF THE GOOD SHEPHERD ENRICHES LIFE

John 10.8, 10: **"All others who came before me are thieves and robbers... The thief comes only in order to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come in order that you might have life - life in all its fulness"**

Who are the thieves & robbers?

Almost certainly Jesus had in mind the false messiahs, the false prophets, who over the years had misled God's people, confused them, and ultimately deprived them of a true relationship with God.

Needless to say, these thieves and robbers do not just belong to the past.

There are plenty of false messiahs & false prophets around today, who promise people everything, and deliver nothing.

Whether it be Marxism, humanism, Mormonism - all these 'isms' lead people astray by promising much, for they all fail to deliver the goods - their promises never come true.

Instead, Jesus says, they "**steal, kill and destroy**" (v10). Instead of giving, they take, and in the end we lose our lives.

By contrast Jesus the good shepherd promises - and delivers - "**life in all its fullness**". Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in his paraphrase: "***I came so that they can have real & eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of***".

The NRSV speaks of Jesus coming that we might have life "**abundantly**".

The underlying Greek word can also be translated as "**extraordinary**".

My Greek Lexicon adds: "*that which is not normally encountered among men*" (A & G)

The nature of this 'extraordinary' 'abundant' life is spelt out throughout John's Gospel. E.g. According to John's Gospel, the very first 'sign' or miracle which Jesus performed was to turn water into wine - a potent symbol of the difference which Jesus makes to life. Jesus turns the water of mere existence into the wine of true life.

Or to put it another way, it is only with Jesus that life truly begins.

The goodness of Jesus is seen in that with him life is enriched beyond measure!

3. UNLIKE THE HIRED SERVANT THE GOOD SHEPHERD GIVES HIS LIFE

John 10.11-13 "When the hired man, who is not a shepherd & does not own the sheep, sees a wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away; so the wolf snatches the sheep & scatters them. The hired man runs away because he is only a hired man and does not care for the sheep"

It could be a tough job being a shepherd. There were definite risks attached to the job. Way back in OT times, e.g., David as a boy had to do battle with both a lion and a bear when he was looking after his father's sheep.

But here in John 10, when the going got rough, the hired man does not bother to defend the sheep: "**He runs away**".

He does not really care for the sheep - he cares for himself..

He is only there for the money. When the going gets rough, he saves his own skin by running away. The interests of no.1 come first.

Some have wondered if Jesus was contrasting himself to the religious leaders of his day - the paid professionals, who cared more for their own interests, than for the interests of the people of God.

Jesus, by contrast, truly cares people. **"I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep"** (v11: also v15).

Jesus, as the good shepherd, was prepared to put the lives of his sheep before himself. That's an incredible thought when you think about it - for ***there is nothing attractive or loveable about most sheep.***

- Sheep can be dirty and pest-ridden. They may look Persil-white against a green background, but once you get near to them, they are normally grey and mucky.
- What's more, they can be silly and stupid. They seem to have no sense of direction or purpose

By analogy ***there is nothing attractive or loveable about most if not all of us.***

For all of us have messed up our lives, by going our own selfish and sinful way.

In the words of Isaiah 53.6: **"All of us were like sheep that were lost, each of us going his own way"**

Yet Jesus was willing to die for us. Indeed, he was not just willing. He actually died for us. He actually laid down his life for you & me.

Jesus makes it clear that his death was no unfortunate accident

"No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own free will" (v18)

Jesus knew what he was doing - he could've run away when the going got tough; he could have escaped the Cross, but he refused to put the interests of self first.

He laid down his life for us that we might escape the clutches of the evil one - that we might live.

The story is told of a young man in the First World War who was wounded in the trenches during an attack. The medic who came to treat him had to say to him, *"I'm sorry, soldier, you've lost your arm"*. The young soldier is reputed to have replied: *"Doc, I didn't lose it. I gave it"*

Jesus didn't lose his life, he gave it.

He gave his life - because ***we, the sheep, were in danger.***

To use the picture-language of John 10, without his intervention we would have been at the mercy of the **wolf** (v12).

Roy Clements: *"The reason many people have difficulty understanding why Jesus had to die for them is because they do not realise what danger they are in. It is as simple as that. There is a wolf coming and Jesus knew it. Sinful men & women like us are one day going to die, and we will then have to face God in judgment. Jesus knew that was our situation and that it was an immensely perilous one"*

How true that is. Jesus died to save us - to save us from the consequences of our sin - to save us from death - he came that we might know **"life in all its fullness"**.

Yes, Jesus is the good shepherd

- Unlike the stranger he knows his sheep
- Unlike the thief he enriches life
- Unlike the hired servant he gives his life

However there is another statement we can make of the good shepherd.

But this time it is not a contrast but more of a parallel

- Like the Father, Jesus guarantees eternal life.

4. LIKE THE FATHER, JESUS GUARANTEES ETERNAL LIFE

Listen to John 10.27-29: **“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never die. No one can snatch them away from me. What my Father has given me is greater than anything, and no one can snatch them away from me.... No one can snatch them away from the Father’s care”**

What a wonderful reassuring statement: with Jesus we are safe forever!
Whatever the future holds, one thing is certain: we are secure in the Saviour’s love.
There is nothing which can ever separate us from his love.
Yes, even death, the ultimate enemy, cannot separate us from God’s love.
As Paul put it when writing to the church at Rome: **“I am certain that nothing can separate us from God’s love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below – there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Jesus Christ”** (Rom 8.38-39). This is not wishful thinking – this is certainty!

Down through the centuries Christians have debated whether or not ‘once saved’ we are ‘always saved’. Once we have made a commitment to Jesus, does that mean that whatever we do in later life, we cannot be snatched away from Jesus?

In the overall context of John’s Gospel we discover that we have to play our part.
As Jesus said in the context of his allegory of the vine, we need to remain in the vine – we need to hold onto Jesus. **“Whoever does not remain in me is thrown out like a branch and dries up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burnt”** (John 15.6).

Yes, we can like Judas, turn our back on God and his love.
BUT if we hold his hand, he will hold even more firmly onto our hand.

For six years I was Principal of Spurgeon’s College.
Our motto was *‘Teneo et teneor’*: ‘I hold – and I am held’
When we hold onto Jesus, he holds onto us – and so too does his Father.
“No one can snatch them away from his care”
Here is a double promise: not only Jesus, but his Father guarantees eternal life.
In the words of one commentator: *‘The Father who gave the sheep to the Son is greater than all powers in the universe, and none can tear them out of his hand’* (GRB-M). What a wonderful assurance!

The question I need however to ask is this: have you such an assurance?
Do you know that your life is secure with Jesus?
The fact is that we can only know be sure of eternal life if we respond to the call of Jesus and begin to follow him.
Listen again to the words of Jesus: **“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, AND THEY FOLLOW ME”** (v27). On another occasion Jesus said: **“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life”** (8.12). To experience the light and the life that Jesus has to offer, we must begin to follow Jesus.
If you have not yet begun the journey of faith, let me encourage you to do that today.