

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.*

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, so our gospel reading is about Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Before we consider how these verses we just heard relate to our lives today, some background is helpful.

Here in southern Ontario, we do have some sheep farms, but there are not that many, compared to other places in the world; the reason being mainly geography and climate. In arid highland and mountainous areas, sheep are often the only livestock that can survive. Much of Judea has poor rocky soil, which is better suited for grazing than cultivation of crops, so keeping sheep in that area was a very common occupation. Keeping sheep for the wool they produce was important, and shepherds work with the same sheep for many years and so develop strong relationships with them. So, when Jesus describes himself as a shepherd, folks around him would know exactly what that meant. It meant a relationship is formed; the shepherd develops trust with the sheep, and the sheep know the shepherd by his voice.

But first, in the text, Jesus identifies a problem. Using analogy, he says, “**10** <sup>1</sup> Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.” This may refer to verses from Ezekiel 34:15-16 where it says,

“<sup>15</sup> I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. <sup>16</sup> I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.”

Jesus is rebuking the ‘shepherds of Israel’ – the religious leaders, describing them as ‘thieves and bandits’ who feed themselves rather than their flocks. God ended their exploitation and took on the role of shepherd. The Old Testament includes several references to God as shepherd and the people as flock, and Jesus is simply continuing that analogy of being the good shepherd.

In our world today it is the same – there are world leaders who enrich themselves at the expense of their people or just disregard the poor and those in need. And of course, there are the televangelists, who often exploit the poor through a combination of mind games, theological distortions, and aggressive fundraising tactics. Central to this exploitation is the Prosperity Gospel which teaches that financial success and physical health are signs of God’s favour. It suggests that believers can ‘activate’ these blessings by donating money to the ministry. They are often encouraged to give their last pennies as an ‘investment’ that God will supposedly multiply into a greater financial return. Just thieves and bandits, like the Pharisees and the wealthy Sadducees.

What of the good news that Jesus brings us in today’s gospel? It is of course, the description of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he loves his sheep, and they respond with love for him. He is also the Good Shepherd because he leads his sheep; and he is ahead of his flock guiding, not behind them driving. The sheep listen to his voice and follow it because they trust it. Because of this love and trust of the Shepherd, they will not follow a stranger’s voice, whatever it may say. A stranger will not tempt them away, because in the voice of the Good Shepherd, they know they have found all that they have been looking for. They know they have found the one worth following, and no matter what another voice may say, offer or how it may speak. They stay true to the voice of truth.

This is part of our calling to Christ, that we stay tuned to his voice amid the other voices of the world. Today there are hundreds of voices calling us, offering us all that we have ever wanted or hoped for. Voices competing for our attention; TV, social media, and everywhere, advertising. Most are false gods that lure us away from the

important things in life and lure us away Christ. These other voices are often insistent and come to us unasked and unwanted. We need to learn to hear the voice of the true God. We do that by reading and meditating on the word of God, praying and communicating with God, and through being part of the community of faith. In that way, those other more insistent voices will be pushed into background 'noise.'

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is the one who calls us by name to himself and then goes before us into the world. One who offers us not what we think we want, but what he knows we need, because he knows us better than we know ourselves. Hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and choose to follow him.

So let us live our lives to the full.

Today there are thousands of voices competing for our ears, hearts and lives: they all sound different, yet lead to the same road, away from God, to a lifeless life. They might offer us 'life' if we do this course, follow this rule of living, invest in this product; then we will have life. Yet, when you cut through the product on offer, the voice that is selling, the seemingly endless rewards; when you strip away all the superficiality, and get to the core, it is the same lie behind the illusion.

Yet, out there amid the noise, there is a voice that speaks the truth, and a voice that speaks directly to you. It offers the same thing: life. Except the offer is not through our effort or our offering of something. The offer of life is through faith and grace. And the one who spoke it, is the source of life and the maker of all things. It was by his voice, life was spoken into existence, and it is by his voice today that he offers us life. Personally. He calls us by name, and in that, we are reminded that salvation comes through a personal relationship with the living God. An offer he makes available to us all.

The thief comes to steal and destroy, but the Good Shepherd comes to lay down his life, so that his sheep may live, and live life to the full. What better voice to listen to, than that one that spoke us into existence, knows the number of hairs on our heads and has plans and hopes for our lives beyond our knowing.

Today, listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd and let him lead you to a life, better than you could imagine. And as you follow him, the Holy Spirit works in you to mould you into the sheep the Father intends for you to be. AMEN