

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

B. THE AMBASSADOR.

18. The Good Shepherd.

John 10:1-21. This is perhaps the loveliest picture of Christ given to us in the gospels. But actually the concept was not new; all through the Old Testament God is portrayed as the Shepherd of Israel, as in **Genesis 49:24**, “the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel:” **Isaiah 40:11**, “He tends his flock like a shepherd:” **Psalms 80:1**, “Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel:” **Psalms 95:7**, “He is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care,” and of course, **Psalms 23:1**, “The Lord is my Shepherd.”

To understand the significance of Jesus’ words we need to look at the life of a shepherd in those Eastern lands – a life which in some places continues today. The main part of Judea is a central plateau where the ground is mostly rough and stony – naturally pastoral rather than agricultural country. One of the most familiar figures would be that of a shepherd and his flock. Sheep then were incredibly valuable, as well as being incredibly stupid, and this made the life of a shepherd very hard. With little grass the sheep were bound to wander far afield, but without protecting fences they had to be watched 24/7. The plateau often dipped down sharply to the craggy deserts below and sheep were always liable to wander away and fall over a cliff. On top of that the shepherd had to be constantly alert for wild animals, mostly wolves and hyenas, as well as for robbers on the look-out for a free sheep or two.

Jesus was doubtless thinking along those lines as he continued his message to the Pharisees: there is no break between chapters 9 and 10 in the original. With their heartless rejection of the man Jesus had cured from blindness they were robbing him of the opportunity to worship and give thanks at the temple, they were robbing him of the self-respect he had just gained and any dignity he could collect from social interaction. In Jesus’ judgement they were not righteous, but robbers!

Jesus could have quoted to them Ezekiel 34:2, “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?” We see today the tragedy of religious leaders who have disgraced their role as shepherds of their flock, but we could be guilty of that whenever we put our own personal gain or comfort before the needs of someone God has brought across our path. Much later, John wrote in his first letter, chapter 4:20, “Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.”

“Real shepherds” were born to the job and began their shepherding at an early age: they came to own their sheep as part of their family and even had individual nicknames for them, like “Brown-leg”, or “Black-ear.” Whereas sheep today are mainly kept for their meat, in Palestine they were largely kept for their fleece and so would remain with the shepherd for years. The shepherd would go before the sheep to make sure the path was safe and for the most part they would follow him trustingly. With such a relationship it was quite natural for a shepherd to risk his life for the safety of his flock.

The shepherd’s equipment was very simple. He had his scrip, a bag made of skin in which he carried his food – some bread, dried fruit, some olives and cheese. He had his sling as a means of defence: the story of David and Goliath gives evidence of the extraordinary skill the shepherd had to acquire! He could also put a stone in the sling and land it just in front of a straying sheep’s nose, warning it to get back to the path. The shepherd had his staff, a short wooden club with a lump of wood at one end often studded with nails. This would swing from his belt and be used to defend himself and his flock against marauding beasts or robbers. Lastly, he would have his rod, the familiar crook, and with it he could catch and pull back any wandering sheep. At the end of the day, as the sheep were going into the fold, the shepherd would hold his rod across the entrance and every sheep had to pass under it so that the shepherd could examine it for any cuts or bruises which he would then dress with healing oil.

We don't need rocket science to equate the shepherd with what we know about Jesus! How often have we begun to stray before some well-aimed "stone" has warned us to turn back to the path? Only in following close to the shepherd can we be protected from the powers of evil and be led to plentiful grazing! And how gently the cuts and scratches of life are healed with the balm of Jesus' care!

In **John 10:1-6** Jesus talked about the sheep pen into which only the true shepherd could gain entrance. In the villages and towns there would be communal sheep-folds where all the village flocks were sheltered during the night: they were protected by a strong door and only the watchman had the key: no-one but the regular shepherds could pass through. Any thief who was game enough had to climb over the wall to get into the sheep. In the morning each shepherd would come and call his own sheep by name; they knew his voice, and would trot out confidently to follow him, knowing he would lead them to good pasture to satisfy their overnight hunger.

Jesus took the illustration further in **verses 7-10**. When the sheep were out on the hills in the summer and did not return to the village at night, the shepherd would use - or build himself, if necessary - a rough open-air enclosure of stones and/or branches and gather his sheep there for the night. There would be an opening but no door of any kind, so the shepherd himself would lie down across the opening and no sheep could get out or in except over his body. In this literal sense the shepherd was the door.

Jesus used this familiar picture to impress on his audience that only through him could they have any access to God. The concept was so mind-boggling that they failed to understand him. Bound up in the metaphor of the door, or gate, was all the security, the wellbeing, the care and the understanding that Jesus himself, as the "Shepherd of Israel", would afford to those who believed in him and his redeeming work for them on the cross of Calvary. Back in **Deuteronomy 30:20** God had said to Israel, "The Lord is your life." Now Jesus summed up his whole purpose and ministry in **verse 10**, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

I have a way of remembering that reference: John 10:10 10 x 10 = 100. Jesus gives us 100% life!

John 10:11-18. "I am the good shepherd," Jesus continued. The word used for "good" in the Greek is not "agathos" - merely the moral quality of a thing - but "kalos", which means that a person is not only good, but that in the goodness there is a quality of winsomeness, loveliness, attractiveness which makes him lovely. In Jesus there is not only ethical and moral perfection, complete wisdom and power: there is also an innate loveliness about him that made the children run to him, the guards to keep their hands off him, and his disciples to follow him. Jesus went on to say that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Later, in **John 12:32**, Jesus declared that "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself," and in this he was referring to the type of death he would die and to which men would be drawn for their salvation. It can also include the sense that the supreme attractiveness of Jesus is the greatest magnet for all mankind.

But Jesus went on to talk about the false shepherd, the hired hand who took on the job simply to make some money or to escape the wrath of someone in the town by making for the hills. Whereas the true shepherd was responsible for the sheep in that if a sheep died, he had to bring proof that he could not have prevented its death, the hired hand had no such responsibility of care and if confronted by a wolf, would leave the sheep to their fate and race away to save his own life. Like the hired hand, the religious leaders of the day had no care for the "ignorant" sheep and would reject them from society if any dared to disagree with their own precepts. God had some stern words in **Jeremiah 23:1-4**, to "the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture! ... Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done."

We don't have to be a preacher for our lives to betray how much, or how little, we love and serve our Lord. We have such a wealth of knowledge, experience and opportunity – do we use it to help or hinder the sheep of God's pasture? "Responsibility is the other side of privilege."

By contrast, in **verse 14**, Jesus made the spellbinding statement that he *knew* his sheep in the same way as his Father God *knew* him! The subjects of a country may know their king, but the king would never really know them. Yet God knows us individually, as His children, and through faith in Jesus we can know him just as intimately as he knows us! **Verse 16** is very special to us on the other side of the world in the 21st century: "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock, and one shepherd." He was talking about us!

If you have ever travelled overseas, you possibly have encountered the immediate "oneness" you can feel with fellow-Christians far and wide. A different culture and language is no barrier to your feeling you are just a part of that one big family who call God their Father. You can worship in a church without understanding a word of the sermon, and say a heartfelt "God bless you!" to the pastor as you go out. Jesus' prayer in John 17:11 – "that they may be one, as we are one," is being answered.

H. V. Morton gives a fascinating account of hearing the strange sing-song voice of a goat-herd climbing one of the hills at the back of Jericho. His language was weird, animal sounds arranged in a kind of order, a laughing kind of whinny. Looking back to his herd he saw they were still engrossed in devouring a rich patch of scrub. "Lifting his voice, he spoke to the goats in a language that Pan must have spoken on the mountains of Greece. It was uncanny because there was nothing human about it." No sooner had he spoken than an answering bleat shivered over the herd but they continued to graze. Then the goat-herd called to one of the goats that had a bell around its neck; he promptly came to the goat-herd and the pair of them disappeared around a ledge of rock. Very soon a panic spread among the herd; they forgot to eat; they looked up for their shepherd, but neither he nor their leader with the bell could be seen. Then from the distance came that strange laughing call and suddenly the entire herd stampeded and leapt up the hill after their shepherd.¹ Verse 27 says "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me." Nowhere does this tenderness of Jesus come across so well as in **Isaiah 40:11**, "He tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."

In Exodus 28:15-30 we have God's instructions for the breastpiece that was the finishing touch of the high priest's regalia. It was a square made of linen and had 12 precious stones mounted on it to represent the 12 tribes of Israel. This breastpiece had rings sewn onto each corner with cords to be tied behind the back of the priest so that it would not swing out as he walked, but be held firmly to his breast. In other words, when the high priest entered the Most Holy Place he was bearing the tribes of Israel close to his heart, just as Isaiah portrayed Jesus as holding his lambs close to his heart. The writer to the Hebrews described Jesus as "that great Shepherd of the sheep" (13:20) who as our great High Priest (chapters 4 and 5) had us on his heart as he entered the God-appointed realm with the sacrifice of his own blood for our redemption.

In **verses 17 and 18 of John 10** we have the climax of Jesus' teaching on his role as the Divine Shepherd who was soon to lay down his life for his sheep – something he would do because of the unfathomable love between his Father and himself. But unlike the earthly shepherd whose life may be wrested from him, Jesus had the authority from God Himself to willingly give up his life as our ransom, in order to take it up again and rise triumphant from the dead. **Luke 23:46** confirms this as Jesus called out with a loud voice from the Cross, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Jesus will always be a dividing point among men. The reaction to his words was divided, some rating him as "demon-possessed and raving mad" while others thought it through and decided the gracious words and healing deeds of Jesus could not possibly come from anyone possessed by a demon. We can either trust him or ignore him: follow him or shun him: love him or reject him: there is no middle course.

Fledgling Ambassadors.

Luke 10:1-24. Within a few weeks Jesus would be back in the temple for the Feast of Dedication, but in the meantime he continued his ministry in Judea. Time was now short, and his message needed to be spread as far and as fast as possible. From his considerable band of followers Jesus chose 70 (or possibly 72) to go ahead of him to prepare the way for what would be his last chance to preach to his own people. (It is interesting to note here that Moses appointed 70 elders to help him in his oversight of Israel: also that the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish council led by the High Priest, numbered 70.)

Again Jesus sent them out in pairs, not only for mutual support but also to comply with the Judean law that any testimony to be valid requires at least 2 witnesses. This time instead of being confined to the region of Galilee, the 70 were to go throughout Judea and still their mission was urgent. They were to travel light and “not to greet anyone on the road.” That could sound discourteous, except that eastern greetings were protracted affairs where each must ask after the other’s health and exchange a rambling list of minor details of everything from their grandmother’s maiden name (more or less) in time-consuming courtesy. There wasn’t time for that now: the gospel message needed to be spread far and wide quickly so that when the events at Calvary took place, the maximum number of people would have had a basic grounding on which to build their faith. After all, Judea was where the Church would begin.

And these ambassadors for the kingdom of heaven were not on a luxury cruise: they had to be satisfied with whatever accommodation was offered them and eat without complaining whatever was put before them – even if, in towns across the Jordan, the meal contained some “unclean” Gentile food! As with the 12, Jesus gave these messengers power to heal and cast out demons along with their preaching. They would be blessed in their ministry, but if they encountered opposition in any town they were to “shake the dust of that town off their feet” as they left; in other words, they were to treat that town of Jews as the Jews would treat a Gentile town, shaking the dust off their feet when leaving it! There would be eventual judgement for anyone who rejected Jesus as the Son of God.

Do we feel the same urgency today, to tell people where lies their only hope of eternal life? Or do we let ourselves be hampered by the non-essential complexities of life?

In **verse 17** the team came back to Jesus with that inexpressible joy that comes from whole-hearted service for God. There was a touch of pride as they reported that “even the demons submit to us in your name,” and Jesus was quick to put a damper on it, reminding them that it was he who had given them such power – even over the power of the enemy – and their only valid reason for rejoicing was that their names were known to God. However, he encouraged them, Satan himself has fallen like lightning from heaven: the battle between good and evil, in which they had been engaged, would eventually be won.

Jesus followed this up with a lovely soliloquy in **verse 21**, where his joy overflowed in a paean of praise to his Father that He had revealed Himself to these “ordinary” folk in His good pleasure. He went on to express the unbreakable union between God and his Son – a union available to these followers of Jesus as well. Little did his disciples realise that what the prophets and kings had longed to see through the centuries of the Old Testament, they were now experiencing for themselves. How blessed they were !

Bethany Haven.

Luke 10:38-42. Luke says a lot in his gospel about the significance of women in the ministry of Jesus : all women of the world should be grateful to Jesus for the respected status to which he has raised them. As he and his disciples were on their way they came to the village of Bethany, about 3 kilometres from Jerusalem, and Martha, obviously convinced of the validity of Jesus’ message, opened her home to them all. To the homeless Jesus this must have been a haven of rest and relaxation

from the constant crowds and with Martha, her sister Mary and their brother Lazarus, Jesus soon formed a firm friendship.

Inevitably there were some neighbours who crowded around even in the home to hear what this Nazarene celebrity had to say. As usual in that male-dominated culture, his listeners were all men – who considered that women didn't have the brains to take in any serious teaching. Yet there was an exception - one bold and daring woman, Mary. Students would sit at the feet of a teacher and the men were content to do so, but they were scandalized that right in their midst, this sister of the hostess, who should at least have known her place, was sitting there with them!

Martha was peeved too, ashamed of her sister's wanton behaviour and distracted by her efforts to prepare on her own a really classic meal for her honoured guest. In the end she could bear it no longer and came to Jesus with her complaint which included a veiled criticism even of him – **(verse 40)** “Lord, *don't you care* that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

But Jesus did not join her in her rebuke to Mary: instead he gave his rebuke, mild as it was, to Martha. “You are so worried over providing me with an elaborate meal,” he told her, “when a simpler dish would have given you more time to listen to my words as well. You are upset because you don't have your priorities right. Mary can see what is most important in life, and it's not for me to change her right attitude.” In just those few words Jesus had struck a tremendous blow for the emancipation of women!

It is important to see, in spite of this, that Jesus' rebuke to Martha was not a rejection. He understood and valued her devotion to him and we shall see later that he was to elicit from her an outstanding declaration that he was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God.

There is room in the Church for every type of personality – the contemplative and the active, the leaders and the followers, the shy and the extravert, although each of us needs to maintain a healthy balance within ourselves. A deaconess I once knew was visiting a young mother who greeted her gushingly at the door with, “Oh, come in. Excuse the mess, but I was having a quiet time with the Lord.” The deaconess commented to me later that the mother would have done better to have had a quiet time with the vacuum cleaner! We need to keep a balance ourselves while showing loving tolerance to those most unlike ourselves!

¹H.V.Morton, In the Steps of the Master, pp.154,155.