

Talk 12 August 2018 – John 10 – “I am the Good Shepherd”

Andrew: Do you believe in coincidences? Because when Frances asked whether one or other or both of us would feel able to preach a Sunday morning sermon we said yes, without really knowing what we were letting ourselves in for. And when we heard we also had a baptism family to engage, enlighten and entertain, Ruth became rather worried that it would be a dusty passage from the Book of Kings that we would have to preach on.

Ruth: But no, instead the passage turns out to be one of my specialist subjects. Because in our sermon series of Jesus saying “I am...” we have reached John 10 – “*I am the Good Shepherd*”. You see, as some of you will know, by coincidence I am a bit of an expert in sheep. I am a farmer’s daughter and grew up on a Scottish sheep farm near Dumfries. So as long as I can remember – I grew up helping out with the sheep – feeding them, shifting them, shearing them, dosing them, lambing them. My Dad and my brother were and are full time shepherds. And they have been able to pass on some shepherding skills to Jamie and Alistair and can share with you some shepherding know-how this morning.

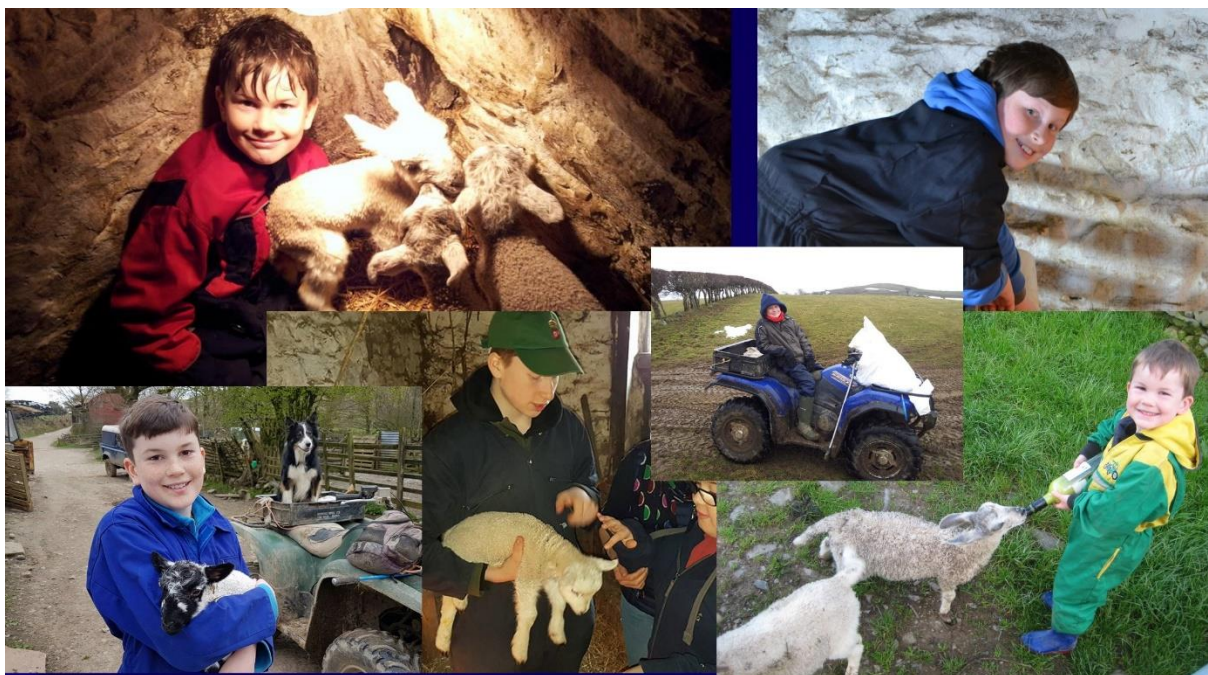


Jamie and Alistair – both baptised here at St Andrew’s are the product of a marriage that started 23 years ago today – surrounded by sheep. For on 12 August 1995 Ruth drove with her father out of the farmhouse, past the sheep in the Castlegower fields, down the country road to a remote Scottish kirk set in fields containing... sheep. She was late and walked down the aisle to Bach’s

While Sheep may Safely Graze. And after we went on to a local hotel again surrounded with sheep fields. So our boys are two enthusiastic shepherds and each Easter we always try to spend a week on the farm helping out at the busiest time of the year – lambing.

The teaching of the Good Shepherd is very familiar. The imagery of John 10 reflects one of the best known of David's Old Testament Psalms – Psalm 23 the Lord is my Shepherd. And we would like to do some active shepherding just now. Jamie and Alistair - could you shepherd all the children to the front here and they can be making some cool flowery sheep with you and Josey while all the adults explore this Bible passage together.

The image of a shepherd is a natural one for Jesus to adopt in 1st Century Palestine – among people used to a rural community for whom sheep and shepherds would be everyday sights. All the people listening in Jerusalem would have personal experience of sheep and shepherds – probably seen them out in pens and fields on the outskirts of the city and nearby villages. Sheep were a vital part of life – their wool essential for warm clothes – their milk for cooking and sheep's meat would have been a mainstay of the Jewish diet. Yet, even with all this local knowledge we see from verse 6 – that even those listening struggled a little with what Jesus was getting at.



Today sheep and shepherds are seen occasionally in the fields around Oxshott – but not much if you live in an urban or suburban part of a big town or city. Most of us have seen sheep and lambs – but do we really understand what it is to be a shepherd? My childhood and teenage years (something recently done by Jamie and Alistair too) involved putting together sheep pens or 'bucht's' – places to keep the sheep safe, sort them, count them, give them medicine and shear them. I had to be trusted to get up early – sometimes the crack of dawn to be out with my Dad feeding, checking or

looking the sheep – alongside him in his Land Rover. I was responsible for loading the right amount of sheep feed or ewe rolls and take them out in the Land Rover and provide for the sheep's needs – look after them when they were sick, help them deliver a lamb when things got stuck, twin on an orphan lamb to a ewe that has lost of lamb of its own or teach them to bottle feed. My brother knows many of his sheep individually – today they have about 1500 on the farm but of the ewes and 'tups' he knows over a hundred by their face – their gait – their behaviour. If an interloper from another farm comes through the fence – he will know it. And while he has not had to lay down his life for his sheep, he was severely infected with some proper flu recently – and had to get up, go out to work all day despite being terribly ill – sacrificing his health for his sheep.

And some of these skills and attributes are eternal – they can clearly be seen from this passage from 2000 years ago – a story that reaches across the centuries and the 3,000 miles that separates us from 1st century Jerusalem. This ancient text contains some of the best guidance – the most perfect advice for what makes a good shepherd and indeed what makes a good parent. It is perhaps no coincidence that this passage has fallen into our lap with new parents in front of us today. We will look at the passage together and identify 5 attributes of Jesus or 5 simple rules for parenting.

We will be talking with you about (1) the importance of clear boundaries, (2) setting a good example, (3) being trustworthy, (4) provide for the needs of sheep and children, but not necessarily their wants and (5) about knowing them and loving them unconditionally and sacrificially.



The Good Shepherd (good parent):

- **Sets Boundaries**
- **Sets an Example**
- **Is Trustworthy**
- **Provides for us**
- **Loves us Sacrificially**

Let's look at those in turn.

1. *The Shepherd sets Boundaries*

Both sheep and children need clear boundaries. A good parent will establish and maintain boundaries – not changing or confusing boundaries – but ones which provide security and reassurance.

Children from toddlers to teenagers need consistency. No child behaves sensibly all the time. You have to say "no", when your child gets too close to the road or gets physical in resolving disputes.

Both parents need to agree where these boundaries are – Andrew and I grew up with different parenting styles, so we often found that we instinctively set boundaries in different places.

You can be creative about encouraging them to work within your boundaries – giving them a closed choice. I remember "Do you want your bath before or after Clifford the Big Red Dog?" "Which side of the car do you want to get in today?"

We see from John 10:1-2 that for the shepherd there is a sheep pen or the sheep field within which only his sheep may gather. God has rules – Jesus gives us tough love – keeping and enforcing those boundaries – because he knows that respecting those boundaries is beneficial to the whole community – the whole flock.

2. *He sets an Example. In verse 3-4 we see - The shepherd "goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him"*

A good parent will lead by example. It is not a case of "do as I say, not as I do." You need to be worthy role models to follow.

Ruth and I in the nearly 30 years since we met, have never shouted at each other or at anyone – we try to resolve differences by talking through them. As a result we have never had 'shouty' children. When they are upset – they tend to give us the silent treatment.

Jesus is the ultimate example. One truth in the Bible that no-one – not even Richard Dawkins – could deny is that if all the world were Christians and followed the example of Christ as much as they could – the world would be transformed into a paradise compared with today's reality. The central truth of the Bible is that Jesus' teaching works – loving God and your neighbour as yourself makes for a better world. That is undeniable.

3. He is Trustworthy.

Sheep follow the good shepherd “because they know his voice” (see verse 4). This was learned over time from the consistent and caring treatment of the shepherd toward the sheep – the sheep learning to know and trust the shepherds call and follow him to water, to feed or to safety.

The sheep will follow the shepherd to the ends of the earth. In the same way your children will trust and follow you everywhere – especially if there is food on offer. The shepherd and the parent must show love and nurturing - so that trust is not lost or broken.

The sheep can wander off and find themselves among wolves if they lose trust and faith in the shepherd. A child who lose trust in his or her parent can lose their way in life.

Everything Jesus says and does in the Gospels shows that he is totally and utterly trustworthy. His life is exemplary and deserving of our trust. We have to learn not to lean on our own understanding, but trust the Good Shepherd. I have found that a challenge myself at times, but that it is a way which takes us into the light and away from darkness.

4. He provides for us

Look at verse 9 - A shepherd provides good pasture. David says of the Lord in Psalm 23: “ The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.”

Parents have to provide for the needs of their children. They have to give them everything they need, but not necessarily everything they want. When Christians are challenged why God does not answer our every prayer and give us whatever we ask for – I think of the example of the Good Shepherd or the good parent. A good parent does not give a child every sweet, chocolate or ice cream that he or she wants – that would lead to a spoiled, unhealthy child with terrible teeth. A child asks for things and the good parent give the child what he or she needs – to grow, to develop, to become a confident and self-reliant adult. The shepherd does not over-feed the sheep but provides for its needs. In the same way, the Lord – our Good Shepherd – listens to our prayers and gives us what we need. And sometimes it may be suffering and trials that we need. It is often impossible for us to work out what God is planning when He puts us through hunger, illness, need or even death.

But a child, a sheep would not prosper in the long run without suffering – at camp a few weeks ago my scouts complained of pain and suffering as they dragged themselves and a heavy rucksack up a mountain – but that suffering causes them to grow and develop and equips them for the world. A world without suffering would be a world without humans striving and inventing and accomplishment. It would be a world either at a standstill or in decline – a world where we would, literally, be going nowhere.

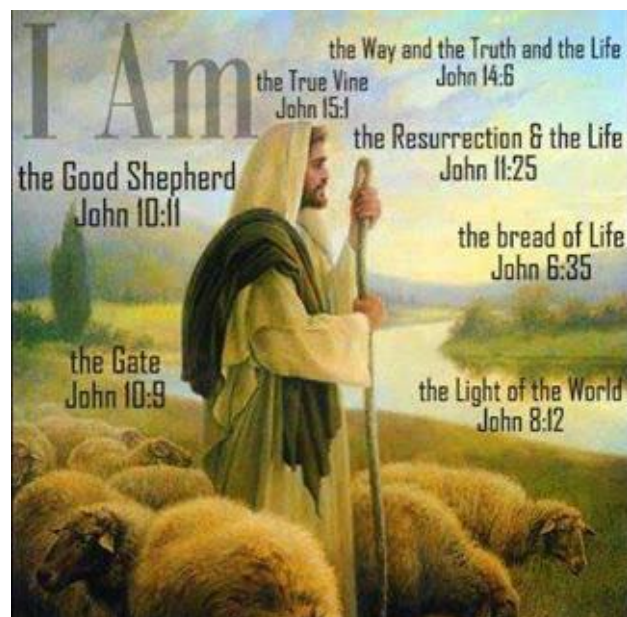
And so the shepherd provides what the sheep needs – whether the sheep likes it or not. And in the same way the Good Shepherd provides for us.

5. He loves us sacrificially.

Five times in John 10 - Jesus speaks about laying down his life for the sheep. Look at John 10: 11, 15, 17-18. This shepherd chose personal sacrifice for the welfare of his sheep.

As parents you willingly experience personal sacrifice for the benefit of your children. You will routinely put the children first. That is because parents have a fundamental and personal stake in their family. They are not like the hired hand – the temp or stand-in shepherd. A hired hand might abandon the sheep when the going gets tough or dangerous – it's only a job to him. A bit like the disconnected childminder or nanny – they do not have the absolute commitment and investment of the actual parent. Albeit that the long-serving hired help on our farm in Scotland was just as dedicated as if the flocks was his own sheep. The real shepherd – the Good Shepherd is just like the parent – loving, nurturing and protecting the sheep – sticking with them through thick and thin as in verse 12. The shepherd knows all his sheep individually - “I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (verse 14). He loves them so much that in the most extreme circumstances he would and did put his life on the line.

So in the same way as the Good Shepherd - we need to support Isabella and all children by being a good example ourselves and teaching them about the perfect example of Christ - being trustworthy parents and trusting in Christ and knowing that he loves us unconditionally and sacrificially.



Andrew and Ruth Burns, St. Andrew's, Oxshott, 12 August 2018.