

## Sermon preached at Gisborne, 3 May 2020

*Living God, help us to hear your holy Word with open hearts so that we may truly understand; and, understanding, that we may believe; and, believing, that we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience, seeking your honour and glory in all that we do. Through Christ, the good shepherd, Amen.*

1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

### **What made Jesus the good shepherd?**

On the surface, this question - what made Jesus the good shepherd- seems quite simple. The word such as 'good' or 'shepherd' is already associated with good images while 'bandits and thieves' tell us otherwise. But the words either 'good' or 'bad' do not contain any absolute values in them as it depends on a person who uses the words. So we'll find out more about the good shepherd in this order: firstly, bandits and thieves, next Jesus as the good shepherd, and lastly the good shepherd and salvation.

### **Bandits and Thieves**

To understand whom Jesus mean bandits and thieves here, we need to go back to the story of the man born blind who receives sight from Jesus. In John 9, the Pharisees who have interrogated the blind man are supposed to be the shepherds of Israel. They are those who care for, protect, and guide the people. Yet they expel the healed blind man from their community by refusing to believe Jesus and his work comes from God. They are more concerned about guarding their power and authority than the wellbeing of the people.

Though receiving the sight, the blind man is still left in the darkness by these religious leaders. Knowing this, Jesus seeks him out again and ask, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"<sup>1</sup> By this time, the blind man begins to understand that salvation is not only by restoring his physical sight. Being isolated by the trusted religious authority, he cannot help but realize that salvation is more than physical wholeness. This helps him recognize who Jesus is, and it leads him to salvation. Now his days of darkness and isolation are over, and he becomes the member of Jesus' flock, cared for and protected. Although easily overlooked, it is Jesus who first offers salvation.

Here questions we may ask about the healing of the blind man are: what is salvation for him? And from what did he need to be saved? Interestingly before he receives sight, he didn't know he was also spiritually blind. It is only after he is expelled from the synagogue which is supposed to be a place for salvation. This new reality may have been frightening for him as much as receiving sight through a radical way. For this man born blind, it may be challenging to decide what is good and what is bad for him. Salvation in John 10:9 is linked to the promise of pasture, and protection. But for the man born blind, it is far more radical as the old understanding of life that he used to hold has to go.

### **Jesus - the Good Shepherd**

Throughout scripture, the imagery of a shepherd and sheep is often used to show the relationship with God and God's people.<sup>2</sup> A good shepherd is a provider for sheep. A good example is in Psalm 23:1-3. It reads, 'The Lord is my shepherd, and I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.' These verses convey a strong salvation message. It is promised that the good shepherd rescues his sheep from any danger – even from death.

A good shepherd is also the protector of the sheep. Young David is a shepherd when Saul and all the men of Israel are fighting against Philistines. Now, Goliath, the Philistine challenges Israel to fight. No one dares to

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<sup>1</sup> John 9:35

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 79:13; 100:3; Ezekiel 34:33; Isaiah 40:11; 1 Peter 5:2

fight against Goliath from the ranks of Israel. Then David offers himself by saying this to Saul. “Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it.”<sup>3</sup> David is a good shepherd who is capable enough to keep his sheep from any danger. The good shepherd also knows his sheep very well.

There is a bond between the shepherd and the sheep. The shepherd knows the needs of sheep and calls them by name. To the ancient Hebrews, a name was not a label or a tool to distinguish one person from another; a person’s name was viewed as equivalent to the person himself/herself. A person’s name signified their person, worth, character, reputation, authority, will and ownership. For example, speaking and writing in ‘the name’ signified authority<sup>4</sup>; acting in someone’s name was to represent them<sup>5</sup>; to blot out someone’s name is to destroy that person<sup>6</sup>; Christ is said to have manifested the Father’s name, meaning that He has made His person known to humanity.<sup>7</sup> To believe on the name of Christ is to believe in the person of Christ (John 1:12; 2:23). To be gathered in Jesus’ name is to be gathered together in His mind, will, and purpose (Matthew 18:20). By the fact that the shepherd calls his sheep by their names, he knows their entire beings as they are which bandits and thieves cannot do. What this shepherd gives his sheep is life that is the sole purpose of God’s creative acts and Christ’s work on the cross.

### ***The Good Shepherd and Salvation***

In our storytime, we heard a king’s story. The question was, what made the king a good king. The king chose to drink the water from the poisoned, well like his subjects did. In doing so, he wanted to remain as the king of the country. He didn’t regard whether it was the right thing to do as long as he remained in the kingship. It was also deemed good by the people as the king went mad just like them. If he was a good king, was it good for the people, or was it for him? This modern parable lets us ponder over the danger of the collective madness, which even has the power to define what is ‘good’ for life. In the present time, we can see similar things happen in the name of the common good, or a faith, or propaganda and so on. In any case, the thing is that no one can see the entire reality from the perspectives of the creator God. In the past, mistakes have been made in the name of ‘good,’ including the wellbeing of humanity. Apparently salvation is not in our own hands.

The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep<sup>8</sup> to take it up again. In this way, he lets his sheep live. His action can be dangerous and radical as he is not acting for the ‘common good,’ or populism. But his work is for good which is defined by the creator and redeemer God.

The Good Shepherd gives us eternal life in which everything is restored and refreshed. In John, eternal life (*zoe- ζωή*) sums up the whole purpose of the gospel. The noun alone is used thirty-six times and various forms of the verb twenty more. It shows that life in Christ is our hope, nothing else. This life that Christ gave us is different from the life that others promise to provide. Life (*zoe*) is not above, or in the future, or in a different dimension which we can only go after we die, or through certain spiritual practices. Life in Christ is not in a distant future, but it begins here and now. Everything that came into being continues to exist in and through and with Christ.<sup>9</sup> The Good Shepherd calls us by our names. We answer to him by living eternal life in his name and doing the salvific work accordingly today, tomorrow and always. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 17:34-35

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 5:23; I Kings 21:8

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 25:6

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 9:14; II Kings 14:27; Isaiah 14:22; Revelation 3:5

<sup>7</sup> John 17:26.

<sup>8</sup> John 10:11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

<sup>9</sup> Colossians 15-20