

Jesus the Good Shepherd

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 April 2026

Preacher: Rev Dr Will Storrar

[0 : 00] In John's Gospel, chapter 10, verse 11, we read these words.!

Amen. What is in a name? What's in your name? If you are like me, you may have a trade name, a serving that describes the trade of your ancestors, Farmer, Baker, Taylor, Smith.

My name, Storer, is an old Scots word for someone who was in charge of herds and flocks. When Bishop Gannon Douglas translated Virgil's *Aeneid* into Scots in 1513, he described one character, Tyrannus, as Storer to the king, one in charge of the royal herds and flocks.

My peasant ancestors were not so grand. They managed lots of sheep in the Howell Fife in the Lowlands and the Noider Peninsula in the Highlands into the last century.

That's my trade name, Storer. But didn't you know that God has a trade name too? In our Gospel reading, Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd.

[1 : 58] Why do you think he chose that trade to describe his mission in life? Jesus, after all, was a carpenter who worked with wood. Why did he describe himself then as a shepherd?

What is it about the working life of a shepherd that resonated with Jesus' own sense of calling from God? Some years ago, my wife and I, while we lived in the United States, had lunch with two fellow Scots.

The husband mentioned that he had originally trained to be a priest. Eventually, he decided this vocation was not for him and he left the seminary. However, he kept in touch with friends who did enter the priesthood.

At a reunion with them, he said, one of the priests told them that he'd recently kidnapped a funeral for the local butcher. You'll never guess the music the family chose for the funeral.

Sheep may safely graze. Sheep may safely graze. That is the calling of the shepherd.

[3 : 11] To look after the sheep, making sure they are safe and well fed and watered. It is a comforting picture of Jesus caring for us like the shepherd caring for the sheep.

But there is so much more to shepherding than that. In the Scottish borders, farmers speak of good shepherds as good kenners.

They mean shepherds who ken their sheep, who know their sheep individually, their histories, their bloodlines and their distinctive habits. To be a good shepherd in Scotland is to be a good kenner of the sheep.

But in the Middle East of Jesus' day, and into our own time among Bedouin shepherds in the desert, heard in their flocks, it is the sheep who are the good kenners.

They know their shepherd, or rather, they know their shepherd's voice as the shepherd goes ahead of them. Someone who has observed the practice of shepherding in the Middle East at first and today has described it in this way.

[4 : 27] In the open wilderness of the Holy Land, the shepherd walks slowly ahead of the sheep and sings out his own distinctive call.

The sheep appear to be attracted primarily by the voice of the shepherd, which they are eager to follow. And then this commentator says, It's common practice for a number of shepherds to gather at midday or after a well or a spring, where the sheep mingle from different flocks, drinking and resting.

But at any time, one shepherd can decide to leave. And on giving his call, all his sheep will immediately separate themselves from the mixed flocks and follow their shepherd wherever he needs.

Now we are getting close to why Jesus chose to call himself the good shepherd. It is abundantly clear that Jesus had observed the practices of working shepherds at first hand.

Jesus knew that the key to safe grazing for the sheep was knowing the voice of their shepherd. That is why in this parable of the good shepherd in John's Gospel, Jesus says, He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

[6 : 00] When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them. And the sheep follow him because they know his voice. Jesus makes that abundantly clear.

He has seen and observed shepherds at work. This is not so much a parable, but an actual job description of the working life of a Middle Eastern shepherd.

It's all in the voice. But why trust this voice, this particular voice? Jesus makes that abundantly clear.

The voice of the good shepherd is a voice the sheep can trust because it is the voice of someone who will not run away when predators approach. Someone who will risk his life to protect his sheep from thieves who come to kill and destroy.

We urban dwellers need to be reminded of the realities of the shepherd's trade. I recently saw a wonderful documentary film about the life of a shepherd today in the mountains of the French Pyrénées.

[7 : 14] The film is called The Shepherd and the Bear. The story centres on the dangers that mountain bears cause to the sheep under the shepherd's care in the high southern pastures of the Pyrenees.

In the film, after a number of dead sheep carcasses are found, the younger apprentice shepherds decide the risk to their own safety is too great and they give up the shepherd of trade in the story of the film.

The film closes with the older shepherd, carrying on alone on the mountain, dedicated to his flock, despite the risk to his own life.

This is the shepherd Jesus has in mind. The good shepherd is no hired man who will abandon the flock at the first sight of danger. The good shepherd's only concern is the welfare of the flock, finding the same grazing and a flourishing life.

This brings us to the heart of Jesus' mission. In chapter 10, verse 10, John read to us, I have come that they may have life and habit to the full.

[8 : 39] This is why Jesus identified with the trade of the shepherd. The good shepherd's only concern is to ensure the flourishing of his flock.

Jesus' only concern is that we might have life in all its fullness. Abundant life. Already we see in this parallel the shadow of the cross.

Because for us, abundant life comes through death. The death of Christ on the cross. It is as Jesus lays down his life on the sheep that the way of abundant life opens up for us.

Later in chapter 10, Jesus says, this is why his heavenly Father loves him. Because he lays down his life on the sheep of his own accord.

The voice of Jesus, the good shepherd, is one we can trust and follow because his only concern is that we enjoy life in all its fullness.

[9 : 49] What does that life look like? To live life to the full is to know the love of God. It is to love one another. And it is to care for our neighbouring need.

The voice of the good shepherd draws us deeper into God's love for the world. The voice of the good shepherd draws us closer to one another as the flock in his hair.

The voice of the good shepherd draws us further out into our world, crying for his help. It is to that world we turn in closing.

The voice of the good shepherd calls us there out into the world because the good shepherd is not some romantic figure from some rural past long gone.

There is one way to have said the parable of the good shepherd is extraordinary and temporary.

With the information technology that surrounds us, never in human history have there been as many divergent, strident, poor voices calling loudly for our attention and our loyalty.

[11 : 05] Daily the sheep must consciously seek to ignore those noises and listen for the voice of their good shepherd and follow it.

In his book, The Anxious Generation, how the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness, the American psychologist Jonathan Haidt considers how to counter the downward pool of what he calls people witnessing behaviour that is petty, nasty, vicious or doing disgusting things physically online.

In our all-conquering phone-based culture now, our children are at risk from all they find online and on the internet.

They have lost the play-based culture that most of us grew up with and they are now stuck to their screens. So Jonathan Haidt, the psychologist says, children need lifted up in some way.

Then in his book, Haidt makes an astonishing confession of how to find abundant life for our children in the digital age.

[12 : 26] He writes, Christians ask, what would Jesus do? And secular people could think of their own moral exemplar to guide them in the internet age.

And then Jonathan Haidt says, I should point out that I am an atheist, but I find that I sometimes need words and concepts from religion to understand the experience of life as a human being.

This, he says, this is indeed one of those times when we need words from religion.

The words of the good shepherd. The word of the good shepherd. It is significant that the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew's Gospel is framed by Jesus' concern for children.

His is a voice we can trust. One that does not groom the vulnerable to monetize them for profit online. It searches for the digitally lost and leads them to abundant life.

[13 : 43] That is why we give thanks for Gordon, our mission worker, and his ministry of children and young people in this community.

That is why we gather each Sunday in this beautiful church in sight of a city in need to hear again the good shepherd's voice and the cries of his lost sheep.

That is why we gather now around the Lord's table. Here we meet the good shepherd who laid down his knife for us.

Here we make safety grace. Amen. Let us make our response to the word of God now.

My god now.