

The Real Shepherd of Christmas

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[0 : 00] Many of you will have seen a few years ago Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*. And in that fairly grueling film, as Jesus is carrying his cross towards Calvary for his death, he has a memory flashback to some of his teaching and activity in the earlier stage of his adult life.

And on one of those flashbacks, as he's carrying his cross towards his death, he remembers his teaching when he said, I am the good shepherd, I lay down my life for the sheep.

It's a flashback that's actually brilliantly done in the film. I say that because as he has that memory in the film, he is walking past the Jewish leaders who've conspired to put him to death.

And it's exactly the right context for those words spoken by Jesus. I am the good shepherd. For there he is, carrying his cross, laying down his life for the sheep.

As he walks past the very leaders or shepherds of God's people, who have led them astray and not taught them faithfully from God's word.

[1 : 23] As they watch smugly, Jesus going to die. When Jesus speaks about being the good shepherd in the passage we've just heard from John chapter 10, his opening words are in one sense innocuous enough.

They sound almost like a straightforward statement of what would be common knowledge about the situation of sheep and shepherds in his day and age. 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.

Well, it would be like us saying that anybody who enters your house through the window or removing tiles off the roof is most likely a thief or a robber. It's obvious in a sense.

The same for the sheep. They would be in a sheep pen that would have one gate. If you're entering from some other means around the gate, then presumably you're not up to good.

That's what Jesus is saying. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. Well, so far, so good. He goes on to say that the gatekeeper opens the gate for the shepherd and the sheep hear his voice.

[2 : 31] He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. One of the remarkable things about shepherds, at least in the Middle East and even today, is that sheep know the distinctive voice of their shepherd and they follow that voice.

A few of us were in Bethlehem and around that area just two or three weeks ago. And again, we heard the same stories that even today, as shepherds look after their little flocks of sheep, those sheep recognize the voice of their shepherds.

Jesus goes on to say, and again, they're obvious things in a sense for his day and age. When the shepherds brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them. We may be more used to the picture where the shepherd is pushing from behind and driving the sheep.

But there in the Middle East where Jesus was, shepherds even today lead the sheep. They walk and the sheep will follow. The sheep follow him because they know his voice.

They'll not follow a stranger, but they'll run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers. So what Jesus has said so far is nothing extraordinary, nothing provocative.

[3 : 44] A simple statement of what is the case between sheep and shepherds. But of course, Jesus is using this analogy to speak of something a bit deeper. It goes on in this passage to say that Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

That is, they may well probably have understood about sheep and shepherds, but they didn't understand the point of what Jesus was saying about sheep and shepherds. Why is he using this analogy, this image or illustration?

Well, as Jesus continues, his words become much more pointed, much more of a sting in the tail of what he's saying to the Jewish leaders of his day.

Jesus has just healed a blind man in the previous passage. And as a result of that, the Jewish leaders have expelled Jesus from the temple area. They've kicked him out of the very place that was God's house.

Now Jesus begins to use this analogy to teach in the light of what's just happened. He says in the next verse, Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

[5 : 00] Now it's clear that Jesus is not just speaking about how shepherds and sheep operated in the ancient times. He says, I am the gate for the sheep. He is the one who provides access, protection, because the gate is there to protect at night.

But the one who is the gate, who opens the gate to lead to water and to pasture. Jesus is saying, I am the gate for the sheep.

And in contrast, he then says, all who came before me are thieves and bandits. Well, to whom is he referring? Who are those who came before him?

But the Jewish leaders. He's referring to the Old Testament times as well as his own day. To the kings, the priests, the rabbis, the Jewish teachers who have failed to do their task as the good shepherds of God's flock or God's people, the sheep.

He's talking about Jewish leaders in general as well as in his own day. And remember that in that film, when Jesus has this flashback, he says these words or has this flashback at precisely the time he walks past the Jewish leaders who've conspired to put him to death.

[6 : 16] Now, the contrast that Jesus makes here is very strong. In the subsequent verse, verse 10, he says, the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.

I came that they may have life. Well, you cannot get two more polar opposites. The thief who came to kill and Jesus who comes to give life.

They're the outcomes, in effect, of the contrast that Jesus is painting here. Those who are the false teachers who've led people astray, both in Jesus' day and through Old Testament times preceding him.

In effect, they're leading the flock of God's people to death. They're self-serving. They're not serving the sheep. They're fleecing the sheep. And they're not feeding the sheep.

You see, Jesus' words here are not innocuous. They are very pointy. There's a sting in the tail as he speaks them to the Jewish leaders around about him.

[7 : 18] Remember that in the preceding passage, Jesus, having healed a blind man, has been kicked out of the very temple of God's presence. Yes, God's presence in Jerusalem.

So he's saying, in effect, that the Jewish leaders of his day and before are thieves and bandits leading people ultimately to death.

By contrast, Jesus is saying, I am the gate that leads to life. But there's a bit more here.

The background of this is significant. And those who would know their Old Testaments may recognize and resonate with some of the words Jesus is saying. And those of you who are here last Sunday morning, I preached on part of the Old Testament background of this passage.

The low point of the Old Testament was about the 500s BC. When the people of God, having been in the promised land, were defeated by the Babylonians, Jerusalem destroyed, the temple destroyed, and the people carted off way across the desert to exile in Babylon.

[8 : 26] It seemed then they were demoralized, dispirited, and certainly defeated. And we see bits of the Old Testament that reflect on this disastrous situation. Why has this happened?

Is God weak? Is God faithless to his promise? Is it because the Babylonian gods were stronger than the God of the Bible? But one of the key explanations that the Old Testament gives by prophets such as Ezekiel were that the leaders were false shepherds, self-seeking shepherds, condemned by the prophet Ezekiel in the passage we saw on our Sunday morning.

Jesus now, when he says, I am the good shepherd, is making a clear contrast between himself and the leaders of God's people, both in the Old Testament and in his own day.

And indeed, ironically, Jesus himself has been kicked out of the temple of God, in a sense, exiled himself away from there. Just like the people of God had been exiled from the temple and Jerusalem and their land so many years before.

But if you remember, if you were here on Sunday morning, the prophecy of Ezekiel goes on to make a stunning promise. God promises that he'll send a servant, David, to be the true good

shepherd of the people of God's flock.

[9 : 50] Fair enough. And Jesus clearly is descended from David. We see that in the fact that he's born in Bethlehem, David's city, because he's descended of the tribe of David, as was Joseph.

That's why they had to go there for the birth, of course. But the prophecy of Ezekiel has an even more powerful promise in it. God will not merely send a descendant of David, but God himself will come and shepherd the people and bring them back to God.

And so in Jesus Christ, when he says, I am the good shepherd, is making a very strong claim indeed. Not only is he descended from David, fulfilling some Old Testament prophecy, but he's saying, in effect, I am God come as the shepherd of God's people.

It's a claim to divinity in the end that Jesus is more than just a good man, more than a healer and more than a good teacher. But is God in flesh, God, a human being, fully human and fully divine, both at the same time.

So Jesus, when he says, I am the good shepherd at the end of this passage, is making a strong claim that that Old Testament prophecy of Ezekiel from 600 years earlier, nearly, is now fulfilled in him.

[11 : 13] And that's why it's so significant we celebrate his birth. Not because we like stories of babies and so on, but because of why Jesus came as the good shepherd long awaited by the Old Testament to shepherd God's people rightly to lead them to eternal life.

The good shepherd has just, in fact, healed a blind man as a little glimpse or foretaste of what he's on about for us all. But now Jesus' words have a complete surprise.

He says, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, not for rabbits, but for the sheep.

But the surprise is, lays down his life. You see, shepherds don't lay down their life for sheep. Sheep were important in the ancient times, but a shepherd's life is worth much more than a sheep.

The shepherd may go to great lengths to protect the sheep and guard them and feed them and protect them and provide for them. But they won't die for the sheep. In fact, the shepherd has got to live for the sheep.

[12 : 26] So when Jesus says, I am the good shepherd and I lay down my life for the sheep, that's an astonishing thing to say. That's a total surprise. It's an odd thing for Jesus to say.

A shepherd's death would be a waste if he dies just for sheep. So why does Jesus say this? There's a couple of points about this that are important.

Jesus' death is not just because the Roman and Jewish authorities conspired to put him to death and he's an innocent victim. Though that is true, Jesus says he lays down his life for the sheep. That is, his death was a deliberate part of his own plan, not just a tragic end, an accidental death to a great man.

But why does he lay down his life? Well, perhaps in this passage, the clearest expression of that comes when he says, I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.

[13 : 33] Jesus died to open the gate to the pastures of eternal life and heaven. He couldn't do that without dying.

It's why he lay down his life for us sheep. To provide access for us, to open the gate for us to eternal life, to God's presence.

Jesus describes this eternal life or this salvation when he says, I've come that they may have life and have it abundantly. And he's not just saying, yes, he wants us to live abundant, indulgent lives here on earth.

But literally the idea is life in all its fullness, life in all its satisfaction. Life that is life as it's meant to be in a relationship with God that lasts forever.

Not just though in quantity as though it'll just go on and on and on and on and on, though that's true. But life in every bit of quality. Life that is perfect in the presence of a perfect God.

[14 : 41] That's what Jesus came to do by laying down his life so that we the sheep may live. And it's free access. He says, so they may come in and go out.

There's security in that expression and freedom in that expression. It's not going to be a life of slavery trapped in a sheep pen, but of free access to the eternal life, the satisfaction, the joy that God's salvation brings.

It's ironic in the sense that we have life to the full because Jesus died and gave up his life for our sakes. Salvation life with God is life to the full.

And for all the joys that you and I have living on earth, all the pleasures, all the joys of excitement and so on on earth, the joys of eternal life are far more deeply satisfying, far greater in their joy, far more perfect.

Because it is a life with God in its fullness and richness. The healing of the blind man was just one glimpse of that life that's to be lived to the full.

[15:56] So Jesus died deliberately laying down his life so that you and I may live life to the full. A salvation that is abundant life.

That is not just a fleeting pleasure. I mean, we'll know today of all days that life is a fleeting pleasure. If we're with children today, they'll open a present. They'll have joy for half an hour. The battery will run out. The toy will break. Or they'll go on to something else or start fighting with someone. Pleasure is so fleeting. But actually, it's the same for you and me. The presence that we will get will bring us joy, maybe for a bit longer.

But actually, in the end, there's so much dissatisfaction in life. It's why we still get presence at all, to be honest. But the promise of abundant life, life in its fullness, life to the max, is a life that is deeply and permanently satisfying in Jesus.

And if you don't know that life, well, let me encourage you to find it, especially this Christmas. It may be that you know something of Jesus, but have not yet received the abundant life that he offers us, that is perfectly satisfying and joyful, not just here on earth, but ultimately and finally in God's heavenly kingdom as well.

[17:14] How do we do that? Well, this passage also gives us a fairly clear indication of that. If Jesus is the good shepherd, we are the sheep. And what do the sheep do in this passage?

They hear the shepherd's voice and follow his voice. So that's how we receive the abundant life that Jesus offers, by listening to and following his voice, hearing and heeding the voice of Jesus Christ, following him, trusting him, believing in him, obeying him, and being led by him to the abundant life of heaven.

One of my favourite programmes has been Fawlty Towers, that sort of manic John Cleese English hotel where everything goes wrong. And one of my favourite episodes is when Mrs Richards comes to stay.

Now, with apologies to anyone here called Mrs Richards, Mrs Richards in that programme, you may remember, is deaf, and she chooses not to hear lots of things. But when her sister rings her on the phone to offer a lot of money for the sale of her house, she hears every word.

She's selective in her hearing. And many Christians are a bit like that with God. We're Mrs Richards Christians. We hear some things, but we shut our ears to the rest.

[18:33] If we are to be the sheep of Jesus' flock, then we hear and heed all his words. We follow all his words and trust all his words.

The Christian life is a life of hearing and heeding God's words. We often think that a picture of a shepherd and the pictures of medieval art, of Jesus as a good shepherd, holding a little lamb, a sort of sweet and cuddly, blonde hair, blue eyes sort of thing.

A Palestinian shepherd then and now is a pretty tough character. They need to be. It's not an easy life. When Jesus says, I am the good shepherd, he's not wimping out into some easy path.

It was a brave and strong thing for him to shepherd God's people and to lay down his life for the sheep. And it's no coincidence, I'm sure, that the first people that were brought to Jesus' birthplace were shepherds.

Not because they were the only people sitting around late at night with nothing to do, but because the shepherds were brought to worship the good shepherd. They knew because the angel told them that here indeed was the good shepherd who several years later would lay down his life for the sheep.

[19:55] Born to die is what we celebrate today because he was born to die that man may no more die. Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ.

Amen.