

We can't understand today's gospel unless we start in John chapter 9. There, the 'man born blind' is healed by Jesus, on the Sabbath. The Pharisees are outraged that Jesus has done this on the day of rest. So, they drive the man out of the synagogue, because he tells them Jesus healed him and that he believed Jesus must, therefore, come from God. The Pharisees are trying to oppose Jesus and declare him a sinner.

When Jesus finds this out, he tells the Pharisees they are living in sin. The start of chapter 10 is in the middle of this conversation with the Pharisees. Jesus has accused them of spiritual blindness in chapter 9 and now he compares himself to a Shepherd. He contrasts himself as a caring, loving and saving Shepherd, against the Pharisees' version.

Jesus describes the Pharisees as heartless. In A.M. Hunter's 1965 commentary, what Jesus says about the "thieves and bandits" that came before him, is connected to Ezekiel chapter 34. There, Israel's rulers are accused of being evil shepherds. They have exploited the people, being forceful and harsh. The sheep were scattered and God foretells that he will send a Saviour from the line of David, who will rescue them.

In chapter 10, verse 11, which we stopped just short of today, Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd". "I am" is the name of God, *Yaweh*, I am that I am. So, Jesus puts himself forward as the fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecy. He is from God, in the line of David and he is claiming the Messiahship.

In the Israel of Jesus' time, shepherds were regarded as the lowest kind of worker: a collection of no good, no hopers. Jesus, himself, has come from a lowly birth, which bordered on scandalous, and he's made a homeless refugee soon afterwards. He couldn't be more different from the wealthy and powerful Pharisees, the religious elite. Jesus is truly one of the ordinary people.

Shepherds in the Middle East at that time would lead their sheep from the front. Because the sheep knew the shepherds voice, they would follow. They needed to be in a fold at night because the wild animals, like lions and wolves would eat them, if they were left outside. The Shepherd would lead them inside and close the gate of the fold. He might lie in the gateway to be aware of any predator trying to enter. Jesus is saying, the thief, whom he likens to the Pharisees, only wants to steal and kill. By contrast, Jesus comes to protect and to bring abundant life. Jesus casts himself as a loving, and self-sacrificing Shepherd who comes to bring life, but we know he can only do this by giving his own life up for his sheep, at the end of the gospel. There is no suggestion of self-sacrifice on the part of the Pharisees.

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In verse 9 Jesus says, “I am” again, likening himself to God, and also to a gateway into the kingdom of God. Sheepfolds were often part of the house; the courtyard in front of the farm building. So Jesus is also saying that he is the gateway into God’s house, where the sheep belong and are welcomed and safe. By implication, the Pharisees are not the pathway to God, so following them will only lead to danger and death.

Something else to notice is that judgement takes place. The sheep of Jesus know his voice and so they follow him. If we do not know his voice we will not follow and so we will not enter the kingdom of God, because we will have followed the Pharisees. Remember, that in John’s Gospel, Jesus has already cleansed the Temple in chapter 2; a kind of judgement event when the Pharisees are condemned for their dishonest practice of the Jewish religion. In chapter 11 Jesus will, literally, raise the dead, in his friend Lazarus, and so set the scene for the final confrontation with the Pharisees. Jesus will be condemned by the high priest, but on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day he will be vindicated by God, through his resurrection. So, Jesus really is the Good Shepherd from God, demonstrated by the Resurrection.

Jesus’ ‘Shepherd’ is a pastoral and caring God who knows us by name, is concerned for us and will even sacrifice his own life for us. This is the kind of God we worship. This is the kind of God who is worthy to be praised. The gospel clearly rejects the Pharisees and the hypocrisy of their behaviour. Reflecting on what it means for us, then I believe we are to listen for the voice of Jesus through study of the Scriptures and participation in the community of faith in the church. Jesus always leads in the way of justice, righteousness and compassion. Where these things are absent, then we are no longer seeing Jesus but the reality of sinfulness.

What might it mean for the world we live in today and our interaction with it? Well, I think of the situation of medical staff in hospitals, carers in residential homes, ambulance, fire, police and all the key workers, who are still putting themselves at risk to keep our life continuing as well as it can. When all of this crisis is over and we and the politicians look back on it, let us commit ourselves to make sure those who care are never left without safety equipment again. Let us commit to maintaining an NHS that is not pared to its bones, so that nurses are forced to wear bin bags because they don’t have enough plastic aprons to protect themselves. Let us commit to recognising the role that carers play in social care of the elderly and the disabled; let’s make sure, by legislation, that they are correctly equipped, trained and valued.

We cannot be passive sheep who receive the sacrifice of care from our God and then treat others harshly, contemptuously or neglectfully. If God cares for us we must care for others and value them. Jesus’ whole life and gospel proclaims this. Otherwise we will identify, not with the Good Shepherd, but with a wicked shepherds, whom Jesus judges and condemns.