



Easter 3

THE NEW SHOFAR

The Gospel is spread on the self-sacrifice of believers

Acts 4:8-12 - John 10:11-18

The two very different “shepherds”

Jesus presents us with two different kinds of shepherds. One seems determined to destroy the flock whilst the other one is prepared and willing to *lay down his life* for the sheep in his care. One is about the self and the other is about sacrificing for the other. In returning to this theme of dying for his sheep, John is deepening the understanding of his readers as to the depth of intimacy that exists between Jesus and those who come to him and *abide in his words* as disciples. This is the dilemma and question facing believers – is this person, this idea, this movement, this latest popular fad building God’s people or is desecrating the divine spark that is within each and every human person?

There have always been false shepherds

The nation has always had what the prophets called *false shepherds of Israel*...**Jeremiah 23:1**...*Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD* – see also **Ezekiel 34:10**), a situation now being repeated in the self-centred ministry of the Pharisees. In the end these “bad” shepherds will not only harm the community of believers but they will destroy themselves, for their major concern is themselves and their own advancement. But notice how the tag *false shepherd* is applied here to the Jerusalem leaders of Judaism. They are saying one thing and demanding a whole range of legal observances from the people but doing little themselves to bring God alive for the people. They preached not God but the institution that was meant to nurture faith.

Do we bring life or do we promote “death”

Once again we see the evangelist highlighting the gulf existing between Jesus – who has come to bring life - and the leaders of the Jews who seek to destroy. Ultimately, of course, these same “bad” shepherds, *thieves* and *robbers* that they are, will put Jesus himself to death. Those hearing this passage would understand the role of a shepherd as being one of caring for his sheep, tirelessly being on guard to protect them from predators and at times, even risking death itself at the hands of thieves who want to steal from the flock. That willingness would be found only in a “true” shepherd, one who loves his sheep beyond himself.

All of this, of course, is a direct and barely concealed challenge to the authority of the Pharisees and the other leaders of the Jews. These *sheep* have been given to Jesus by his Father and he has been given responsibility for them. But they are more than just “sheep” for they *know* Jesus and this kind of *knowing* means they acknowledge his true identity, his mission from the Father and the offer of eternal life he brings to them from God.

Furthermore, the language of *knowing* used here means these “sheep”, those who *abide in the words of Jesus*, are invited to make their home (with Jesus) in the very life of God himself. Note the way

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John expresses this. The mission of Jesus is to bring all men and women into the life of the Godhead – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It has little to do with religion and indeed, Jesus did not start a new religion. His core mission was to bring the gift of life.

This passage brings together two of the major teachings of John's Gospel – (a) the intimacy that exists between the Father and the Son is an intimacy the Son shares with those who believe and is an intimacy with the Father into which believers are invited. And (b) what the Son is doing for the sheep given over to his care is nothing other than what the Father wants and desires for them, gifts they are not receiving through Judaism's present directions.

Why is this important for us? Because it reminds us of the core focus, the number one priority for our discipleship. It is meant to be about bringing God alive for others. If not, then we run the risk of imitating Pharisees and the Jerusalem leadership.

We are responsible for our fellow sheep

We have in this passage another of John's great sermons from Jesus. John is reminding the Church of his own time of the primacy of being one with Jesus but also one with each other. Sheep are always safer when they are a part of a flock. When they are scattered they become easy prey for wolves and thieves. Thus, a key part of the role of any shepherd will be that of holding the flock together. Everything else will then flow from that point – feeding, sheltering, protecting, watering, leading and so on. No disciple should ever feel themselves isolated or marginalized within the community of faith and the unity of the flock is one of the great evangelical tools for taking the Gospel out into the wider divided world.

How much of ourselves are we prepared to sacrifice for others?

Why it is that Jesus is presented as being our Good (with the Greek speaking of him being the “true” shepherd) Shepherd? It is because his love for his sheep has no limits – *I will lay down my life for my sheep*. He gives all he has for us and that self-giving never ends. All he endured has been endured for our sake, that we may come to *know* the Father. The very mission of Jesus is presented as being nothing less than bringing all people into the same kind of intimate relationship with God he himself has with his Father in heaven.

Knowing, as John uses it here, has the sense of placing the self under God's authority, obeying him and living according to his will. This proved to be an impossible task for a people given over to disobedience. If salvation depended on the keeping of laws, we would all be doomed! This is why the Father sent his Son to be the Good Shepherd to his flock. This new people/flock will *know* God (in and through *knowing* Jesus) because the divine Law will be written in their hearts. They will know it.

This kind of language used in speaking of the renewed relationship between God and creation is the same language used in marriage relationships and is meant to be an expression of the depth of intimacy God seeks to have with those who come to believe in his Son. Jesus speaks in terms of indwelling – *I will be in them and they will be in me, just as I am in my Father*. Thus, it is that Jesus himself is once again offered as the very model of discipleship. It is in our imitation of Christ, in our following of his ways that we find ourselves caught up in the life of God.