



Sermon

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The Good Shepherd

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It is hard to see how the compassionate and pastoral image of the good shepherd could lead to the violence and horror of the Cross; but it does! And only by looking at the context within which it happens can we see it in such a way that the beauty, horror, and challenge of it will hit us with the force that it is meant to.

The great controversy: From John 7:1 to the end of chapter 11, our Lord's life is in danger. John tells us that He did not remain in Jerusalem but went up north to Galilee because the Jewish authorities wanted to kill Him. (John 7:1)

We are more likely to get polite disdain or patronising arrogance than violence, but it is no less threatening to those who experience it. Learned argument takes its toll of the new student in academia, but the attitude of surprised disbelief is harder to combat. Any student going to a new college wants to be accepted. It is not easy to set yourself up against learned women and men who have spent a lifetime in study. The reaction to Jesus as the Gospels portray Him may be a more muted today but they are none the less deadly to a Faith that has yet to be fully formed.

The stunning thing in this is that no matter what Jesus does, no matter how many miracles He performs, there are always two reactions: belief and fury. We should not be surprised then, if we face a similar reaction. Jesus told us very clearly, "If the world hates you know that it has hated me before you." (John 15:18) We have witnessed this in the past week with the terrible stabbing of the Bishop in Australia.

This, then is the context in which Jesus proclaims Himself as the Good Shepherd. The shadow of arrest and execution is hovering in the background.

The GOOD Shepherd: The leaders of Jesus' day were supposed to be shepherds of their flock, loving, and helping them understand and grow in their Faith. Instead, "They tie up heavy loads and put them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." (Matthew 23:4.)

By contrast Jesus comes with this picture of a shepherd who is willing to do whatever it takes to open the way for any and all who want access to His Kingdom. Jesus knows and understands what we, as sinful people, must contend with. He knows the burdens we carry. Some of them are self-imposed. Many are the result of upbringing and heredity.

In other words, Jesus knows that we are helpless to help ourselves.

Here is how C S Lewis puts it in "Mere Christianity".

"But if you are a poor creature- poisoned by a wretched up-bringing in a household full of vulgar jealousies and senseless quarrels- saddled, by no fault of your own, with some sexual difficulty- nagged day in and day out by an inferiority complex that makes you snap at your best friends- do not despair. He knows all about it you are one of the poor whom He has blessed. He knows what a wretched machine you are trying to drive, Keep on. Do what you can. One day (perhaps in another world, but perhaps far sooner than that) He will fling it on the scrapheap and give you a new one. And then you may astonish us all- not the least yourself: for you have learned your driving in a hard school."

It is to people like us, like you, that the Good Shepherd comes. Or to put it another way, He has come to a world that He knows and understands and loves it despite what it is. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for a world like this. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for people just like you, and just like me.

Contrast that with the attitude of the Leaders in Jesus day, and sadly some in our day as well. Matthew 23 is one of the most terrible chapters in the Bible. There Jesus condemns all in the leadership of the Church as more interested in the minutiae of the Faith than they are of the people for whom the Faith exists. What we have to continually be reminded of is that we are sinners just like everyone else. The only difference between us and all others is that we have discovered that there is a Good Shepherd who shows us the reality of the Father's love for us all. The one great danger for all of us is that we can so easily slip into thinking that we are BETTER than others, when St Paul so clearly taught us that we are to think of others as BETTER than ourselves. And with even greater authority our Lord tells us to love "as He loves us." To love is NOT to accept their behaviour. It is to accept the person DESPITE their behaviour. We can speak the truth as clearly as we are able, but it must be with an attitude of love, or we will never be heard. St Paul again, "If I speak with tongues of men and angels but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol." (1 Corinthians 13:1)

When any leader is challenged to lead in this way it is no surprise to see that the response the Lord Jesus received was death threats. Without saying a word His life and ministry is a rebuke. His very presence is a challenge. It will be received with either love or hatred.

Now please notice where this goes in today's reading. Jesus knows exactly what He is doing and exactly where it will end. He knows that if you challenge the powers of this world that at the same time the evil behind all evil is also being challenged. Jesus knows that it is this enemy that must be defeated, and He knows that the only way to defeat the devil is by letting him do his worst.

That is why Jesus makes it plain to us that He CHOOSES to pay that price. No one takes it from Him. This is the centre of our Faith. The God who is the creator of all. The Creator who is the source of all life will give His life for the sake of the rebels He came in love to rescue.

The final thing to note in our reading is the conviction that He will rise again. Most references to the Resurrection in the New Testament show that it is God who raise Jesus. It is always in the passive voice, meaning that this is something that happens TO someone not something they do themselves. What we see then with this reading is that the Father and the Son are working in complete harmony.

The Resurrection is the foundation of the Christian Faith. Without it we are, as St Paul again tells us, "Of all people the most to be pitied." But is the Resurrection believable? Is it possible to be sure that it did happen?

For well over two centuries the central truths of the Faith have been under attack from within the Church as well as from outside. The attack was often made on the idea that the stories of the Resurrection are written a long time after the events they describe and that instead of being a real event they are legends that have grown up over time.

There are many scholars who have challenged this. One such scholar has accepted the challenge laid down by the sceptics. Using only the books from the New Testament that are agreed to be written by St Paul, Gary Habermas shows that rather than come later, the death deity and Resurrection of Jesus come very early. He makes the claim that the earlier the record the greater the conviction that Jesus is God in human form and that He died and rose again. This is how Habermas argues.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 15 at around 55 AD. The death of Jesus is agreed to be around 33 to 35 AD, a mere 20 years after the event. Both Paul's experience of meeting with the Risen Lord AND his time with Peter James and John recorded in Galatians show that it was a number of years BEFORE he wrote that he received from the eyewitnesses.

Habermas goes on to show that in the NT there are short sayings that are very early creeds put in such a form as to be easily remembered. And according to one scholar these creeds came into being a mere six months after the events they describe. This passage from St Paul is one of those creed-like passages.

So rather than have a late date placed on the accounts of the Resurrection, we can say with confidence that on the grounds of the normal method of historical enquiry, the Resurrection stories are very early indeed. They are in fact eyewitness accounts.

It is entirely reasonable to believe that the accounts recorded in the NT are telling us the truth. Jesus is alive. Death could not hold Him down, He is Risen.

Now if the Resurrection really did happen then what Jesus said about His death comes at us with a new force. His death was the final battle that defeated the powers of evil that rule over much of this world. Not only that but those same forces of evil want control of your life and mine. Jesus tells us that His voluntary death was for us. His sheep will be rescued. This Good Shepherd has given His life in order that we may live life with Him.

What this means for us is that while we go about our daily lives doing all that we can to walk in obedience to Him, nothing we do or say for Him will be wasted. You may think that you have little influence on people. That may be true. But "Little" is not nothing. As we as a congregation pray the prayer we have been given for our Church we can be assured that God is at work in our midst not because we are good but because He is.

And if you find yourself once again doubting God's love and acceptance of you, remember that He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life when you were far from Him. This is His world. You were created by Him and He longs for a relationship with you in a way that makes all the love we muster a tiny flame compared to His. If you could just see Him as He is one glimpse of His face would convince you of His love for you.

As St Paul tells us, "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:58.)