Christ the Good Shepherd
John 10:1-21

We're looking at some of the sayings of Jesus that people in his day reacted most strongly against. And the reason for doing that is, if you're going to follow Christ, you need to know who he's saying he is. And these sayings of his that got him into trouble tell us, perhaps more clearly than any others, who he's claiming to be.

And today we're looking at the passage in John 10 that Alex read to us. And Jesus uses a number of metaphors there but the most striking is in v11 and 14, where Jesus says, 'I am the good shepherd.'

Nothing controversial about that you might think. I mean, that is about as unpretentious, or as undemanding a description of oneself as possible isn't it? Who could possibly object to someone saying they care for fluffy lambs? Except people did. In fact, they reacted strongly. Look at v19-20, 'There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, "He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?"' So why was this so polarising?

We're going to look at three things: Bad shepherds; the good shepherd; and the way to life.

Bad Shepherds
Look what Jesus says in v10: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." And it's the search for abundant life, the good life, the life that you really want, that drives philosophy and the consumerism and activism of modern life; and it's what religions promise to give you isn't it?

But look what Jesus says in v8. He's already compared God's people to being like a flock, and then he says, "All who came before me are thieves and robbers." And he's talking about religious leaders. And he says they're like thieves, bandits, stealing from the sheepfold. They promise you life, but in reality what they're offering you is death.

Now clearly, Jesus is not lumping everyone who went before him into one basket. He doesn't mean Moses or Isaiah or Jeremiah were thieves. The people he has in his sights are people like their current religious leaders, men like the Pharisees, who peddled a line that it was in keeping the rules, in making and keeping yourself acceptable to God through spiritual or religious practices, that you could find life. And Jesus describes them as thieves. They say they're telling you the way to life, but in reality they are robbing you of it.

And in saying that, Jesus is drawing from Ezekiel 34, where God criticises the religious leaders of Ezekiel's day for using God's people rather than caring for them: "Prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them." (34:2-4)

But it's not just *religious* leaders Jesus has in mind here. Commentators agree that Jesus is almost certainly also pointing the finger at the various messianic pretenders who came before him. Men who promised people the world; promised them freedom and deliverance, a wonderful future, but in

reality brought them only more suffering and slavery. Verse 10, “the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.” Men who promised a spiritual, or secular, abundant life, but left a wreckage in the lives of the people who followed them.

And if you think about it, that critique is as valid as ever, isn’t it? There are the ‘hired hands’ as Jesus calls them in v12. Spiritual leaders with no personal attachment to the sheep other than that they use them for the own self-interest. Who are more committed to their own well-being that that of the people they claim to help. Who use religion or spirituality as a way of making money or promoting themselves. And you’ll find their books lining the shelves of any airport bookshop - when you go back to flying, of course!

Then there are the those who, with the Pharisees in the past, say, the way to abundant life is by obeying the rules, or following these religious practices, by living an upright kind of life, so God is pleased with you and you deserve the life you want.

And the humanistic, secular world also has it’s false shepherds, doesn’t it. Those messianic pretenders who promise that if you follow them, or their politics, they will lead you into the abundant life of the promised land. Think of Mao or Pol-Pot, or Hitler or Stalin or any other minor player on the world stage, who promises the world, that they’re the solution, but bring suffering in their wake. Who promise life but steal, kill and destroy. Where the dream of a humanist utopia ends in dystopia. And it doesn’t even have to be that dramatic, does it? Just the plain old consumeristic, materialistic world that is peddled to us promises so much - like buy this car and you’ll have a happy family - and it fails to deliver.

So no wonder Jesus critiques it. A shepherd is supposed to bring security and protection, and to nurture the sheep, not the opposite.

But if critiquing current leaders was enough to polarise the crowd, it’s what he said about himself that was even more controversial.

The Good Shepherd

Now, if you’re looking for a plumber, and you see a white van driving past, they advertise their skills in just a few words, don’t they: plumbing, bathrooms, heating. Or go on LinkedIn and people list their skills: This is what you get if you employ me. Well, in this passage, in just a few words, Jesus sets out who he is; what it is in the marketplace of religion and spirituality and this search for abundant life, that he offers.

In v7 he says, “I am the door of the sheep.” Whether that’s the doorway to salvation, or the way into the abundant life we’re looking for, Jesus says, I’m the only way to get there. Verse 9, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.” Just ask yourself, do you want to know a deep inner and eternal security? Do you want to experience a personal growth of character and life, an inner thriving that makes up the abundant life? Well, Jesus says, I am the door to that.

Then in v11 he says “I am the good shepherd.” That there are all these other religious or secular leaders and then, there is Christ, in a class of his own. That whereas other religious leaders offer a list of rules, or practices to follow, or truths to learn, Jesus offers himself as the One to follow. That he didn’t simply interpret to them the rules of life, he is the rule of life.

And then he says that while other leaders, religious or secular, use people, he's the Good Shepherd and the Good Shepherd, v11, 'lays down his life for the sheep.' That when the flock, his people, is in mortal danger, he doesn't just risk his life for them, he gives it.

Now, you and I can hear that and think, I still don't get why that is so controversial? Why does that leave people thinking he's demon possessed and insane?

Because the people listening to him were Jewish and their world-view was shaped by the Old Testament. And in the Old Testament, it was God, YHWH, who was the Good Shepherd.

The patriarch Jacob, as he's dying and blessing his people, described God as 'the God who has been my shepherd all my life long.' (Gen 48:15). In the psalms, the people sang of God as their Shepherd: Psalm 23:1, 'The Lord [YHWH] is my shepherd'; Psalm 28:9, 'Oh, save your people and bless your heritage! Be their shepherd and carry them forever.'

And in Ezekiel 34, in response to the false shepherds who fleece the flock, God promises, v15-16, 'I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.'

And because God was the shepherd of his people he chose David, a shepherd, to be their king. And as a boy David defeated their enemy, Goliath, the giant, with the sling and stone of a shepherd. And at his coronation, the people came to him and said, 'The Lord said to you, 'You shall be shepherd of my people Israel' (2 Sam 5:2). And in all the dark years, the prophets held out the promise that God would send another king, in the line of David, to shepherd his people. Jeremiah 23, 'Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!… Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch and he shall reign as king' (Jer 23:1, 5); Ezekiel 34 again, "I will set over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God." (v23-24). And in that passage you hear every Christmas, 'But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days… *And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD*.' (Mic 5:2-4)

So, when Jesus stands there and says that in comparison to every other religious leader or teacher; in comparison to every other secular king, "I am the good shepherd", can you see what he's saying? He's not just using a comforting picture of the kind of leadership he wants to demonstrate. He's claiming to be the Ultimate Shepherd, YHWH, God himself. He's claiming that in him all these prophecies of a coming descendent of David who will shepherd his people with justice are fulfilled, that he is the long promised Shepherd King, that it's in him and him alone that Israel, and you and me, will find abundant life.

No wonder people said, you're insane. But ask yourself, is he?

The Way to Life

If you're not yet a Christian, before you dismiss Jesus as another religious flake, look at how others in the crowd respond, v21, "These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a

demon open the eyes of the blind?" And they're saying to those criticising Jesus, look at his life, look at his miracles, listen to his words, before you dismiss him. And John, who wrote this, would say the same to you.

You know, there have been many religious or secular leaders who have claimed to be someone special and led their people into disaster. And when you look at their life and their words and the way it all comes crashing down, you can see them for the fakes they are. But with Jesus, you can't do that. No one denied he did the miracles he did or said what he said. They didn't kill him because he didn't say these things or do these things, but because he did. And his words aren't the words of a madman, and the way he brings health and wholeness aren't the actions of a fanatic, and rather than lead his people to disaster and death he alone gave up his life for his people. So if you're not yet a Christian, don't dismiss him with a wave of the hand. Do yourself the favour and him the respect of seriously considering, is he who he says he is?

Then, secondly, Christian or not, respond to him. He is calling your name. In v16 he says, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold." And if the people of Israel were God's flock, his fold, he's talking here of the gentile world, of you and me. So just speaking generally, he has come for the world. But specifically, he's calling you, by name: Verse 3, "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." Maybe you're investigating Christianity and are feeling drawn to it. Christ is calling your name. Or maybe you're already a Christian but, at least in your heart, you know you're wandering off, you're giving your heart to other things, and your conscience is pricking you. He is calling your name. So turn and listen to him.

Thirdly, follow him. In v4 Jesus says of the good shepherd, "When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice." In the West, shepherds drive their sheep from behind, with a stick and a dog. And if that's not a picture of what religion can be like, I don't know what is! But in the East, a shepherd leads his sheep and they follow his voice. And you can hear Christ's voice through his word, through the Bible, daily leading you, daily shaping you, discipling you, bringing you ever more deeply into the abundant life he has for you.

You see, it's through his word that he leads you into all those things that Psalm 23 talks about: into those pastures of rest and those waters of peace. It's through his word, his voice, that you'll know him guiding you in righteous paths, and his presence supporting you in those dark valleys. And it's through his word, him speaking to you, that you'll know the certainty that though you have many enemies, Christ is leading you to his banquet hall and he will bring you safely home.

But listen, while he calls each of us individually, and the responsibility to follow is down to us as individuals, the abundant life Jesus talks about is a life in community, in being part of the flock. So as we begin to be able to start gathering again, don't let the wolves pick you off. Because there will be multiple reasons why you might choose not to get back into the habit of going to church or homegroup. Maybe you've got comfortable on that sofa in your pyjamas. Maybe you think if church restarts there'll be singing, or no singing. Maybe you think 'they're doing services inside', or 'they're doing services outside, I'm not coming'. Maybe you'll think the group is too small, or too big. Or they make me wash my hands, or they don't wash their hands enough. Listen, the wolves of comfort, or fear, or pride, or self-sufficiency, will be more than happy to scatter the flock in the weeks ahead. And the devil is always divisive. Now is the time to show grace and patience to each other, not the time to let the wolves divide us. So, let us be listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd in his word and, as you are able, gather with his flock.

Fourthly, let the way the Good Shepherd leads his flock shape the way you lead. That passage in Ezekiel 34, where God critiques the leadership of Israel, is not just about the priests and prophets, it's as much about the secular rulers, the kings and governors. And so when Christ comes and says, "I'm the Good Shepherd" he's laying down a new pattern for leadership, spiritual and secular. And that pattern is one of life-laying down service. In 1 Peter 5, Peter addresses the elders of the church and says, 'Shepherd the flock of God that is among you… not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.' In other words, you don't exercise leadership to get a crown, the glory, the praise now, you do it for the crown up ahead. And you shepherd under the chief shepherd, the one who lays down his life for the sheep.

So, whether it's in your family, or in your workplace, or in the church, take a look at the Good Shepherd. See how he leads you. See how he feeds and nurtures you. See how he seeks your thriving. See how, at the cross, he gives himself up for you. And then look at your own leadership, in whatever sphere that is, and ask, in the light of his love for me, are there changes I need to make?