I am the Good Shepherd
John 10:1-18

One of the many joys of having daughters is their reaction when we pass a field of sheep – especially when there are lambs: "Oh, they're so cute, oh they're so fluffy, I could die!" But when Jesus refers to us as sheep he's not thinking, 'you're so sweet I just want to cuddle you', is he?

Your Sheepiness
Now, I know that word doesn't exist, but you'll get the idea.

You see, when Jesus uses this image of sheep and shepherd, he's drawing on two things. Firstly, he's tapping into a rich seam of imagery from the Old Testament, where the people of Israel were described as God's flock. For example, when the psalmist remembers God delivering his people from slavery in Egypt he says, 'You led your people like a flock' (Ps 77:20). So God is their shepherd, and they're his sheep. It's why King David begins his most famous psalm, which is rich with this image, by saying, 'The Lord is my shepherd' (Ps 23:1).

But not just the Lord: the leaders of the people, men like Moses and Joshua, were also described as shepherds. And when the Lord raised David up from keeping sheep to become king, the Lord said to him, "You shall be shepherd of my people Israel" (2 Sam 5:2) – a shepherd king.

So that's the image Jesus is drawing on here. To be one of Jesus' flock is to be a member of God's people. To be among those he is leading out to life and freedom, to green pasture and still waters.

But that's not the only thing it means to be a sheep. It's not just that you're special, it's also that you're stupid. And having offended you, I'll tell you why!

Some years ago we hired a holiday cottage for a week on a sheep farm in the South-West of England. And not long after we arrived I got chatting to the farmer. And he was an interesting guy because, having had a successful career in banking in the city of London, he had given it up to become a farmer. But talking to him, it was pretty clear that he was regretting it, and he could barely hide his dislike of the sheep. And the reason he gave was their sheer stupidity and in particular the fact that they were always trying to kill themselves. And he spent his life having to rescue them from one hole, or river, or bramble bush, or fence after another. And had he *really* given up the City, and a profitable career, for them?

You see, sheep are the dumbest of animals aren't they? Head down, continually feeding, they're oblivious to danger until it's too late. And so when Jesus calls you a sheep, it's not exactly a compliment is it? I mean imagine of someone were to call you that today, how would you take it? "You're just a sheep!" By which they mean, you're too dumb to think for yourself. Margaret Thatcher the British Prime Minister, was known for being fierce in debate, but one of her ministers, the foreign secretary, was a much more gentle man. And one of his opponents once said that debating with him was like being savaged by a sheep. And he didn't mean it as a compliment.

But if we're honest with ourselves, we know we're like sheep, don't we? Just like a sheep is forever at risk of getting lost, or into trouble, or putting itself at risk, so we're constantly messing up, and straying from the straight path and wandering from the good pasture, and we do stuff we shouldn't do, think stuff we shouldn't think, say stuff we shouldn't say, watch stuff we shouldn't watch. And, like a sheep, we're easily led. And, just like a sheep, our hearts are easily startled and made anxious by the thousand different noises of life's worries.

So, whilst it may not be a compliment, when Jesus calls us sheep, he's right.

But the problem is that you think it's only you who's like that, but that everyone else is making a much better job of life in general, or of being a Christian in particular, than you are. That it's only me who's a stupid sheep, it's only me who keeps wandering off, and everyone else has their life sorted. And I'm a fraud, just waiting to be found out.

When I was a newly appointed medical consultant, I had this growing sense of a lack of confidence, that I wasn't up to the job. And so one day I summoned up the courage to talk to a senior colleague. And I said to her, 'Look, I feel like a fraud. I'm responsible for the lives of all these babies, I have all these staff under me, and I feel like I'm just waiting for everyone to realise that I haven't got a clue what I'm doing, that it's only a matter of time before someone discovers that I never went to medical school. I feel like I'm just waiting to be found out.'

And she simply smiled and said, 'Listen, we all feel like that.'

But the problem when we think it's only us is that we hide. We know the real state of our hearts, of our sheepiness, but we think that if people really knew what I was like, they'd want nothing to do with me: if they could read my mind, or see into my thoughts, they'd reject me.

Well, look what Jesus says in v14: "I am the good shepherd. I know my own." You see, Jesus knows you. In all your sheepiness, in all your wanderings, in all your failures, in all your anxieties, in all your sinfulness, he sees beneath the veneer and behind the mask. And he doesn't reject you. Instead he comes to be your shepherd. Because it's precisely your sheepiness that means you need a shepherd.

Your Vulnerability

Look at v1: where Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber." In other words, Jesus says, there are people who prey on your sheep-like tendencies. But to understand who Jesus means, you've got to understand the context.

You see, what comes immediately before this passage here in chapter 10? Jesus healed a man blind from birth. But as a result the religious leaders expel that man from the synagogue. They think they're the guardians of God's flock and can

chuck him out of the sheepfold, and Jesus is saying, you're not shepherds, you're thieves and robbers, you're just in it for your own gain.

And so at one level, you and I are vulnerable to false shepherds – to religious leaders or spiritual guides who say, 'hey this is what you need to do to get your life in order; to be enlightened, to deal with your anxieties; to find peace, to feel good about yourself – to be less like a sheep.' But in reality they're just religious hucksters, feeding off you. Thieves and robbers, Jesus says.

And yet, this doesn't have to be overtly religious does it?

I mean think about who the influencers of society are today – the shepherds, the pastors, the spiritual guides of society. Who or what influences how you think and live? How you spend your time, your resources – who shepherds your life? Who or what do you take advice from on what the good life looks like? It could be anyone, couldn't it? Anyone or anything from Oprah, the high-priestess of celebrity culture, to the Economist magazine. It could be the advertising agencies or your favourite politician or media personality, or TV series. But whatever it is, and it will most likely be multiple, what they share in common is that they're all guiding and shaping your life – preaching you a message, leading you to some vision, of what the abundant life we're all seeking looks like. And Jesus says in v1, 'but unless they come through the door, they're robbing you.'

And remember in v7 and 9, who Jesus says the door is? "I am the door," so unless they're coming through me, Jesus says, they're thieves.

Now the church offices share a building with a small company that runs 'come and play with Lego' days for kids. And they're on one side of the building, and we're on the other. And on numerous occasions, I've watched as mums with young children wander around on our side of the building looking lost. And I've got so used to that hassled look that when I see one I nip out and say, 'are you looking for the Lego people by any chance?" And they go, 'yes!' and so, like a hero, I'll say, 'well let me tell you where the door is.' And Jesus is saying that anyone who does not point you to the door, who says you can find the good life that you're looking for anywhere other than in him, who tries to sell you a vision for life that does not have Christ as it's centre point, is robbing you of what is truly life.

So that's the first way you're vulnerable, but it's not the only way.

As well as thieves and robbers, Jesus talks in v12 of a wolf, who 'snatches and scatters' the sheep. In 1 Peter 5:8 Peter calls the devil 'a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour'. Well, here Jesus calls him a wolf, who wants to get his teeth into you.

So how do the forces of darkness prey on your sheep-like-ness? Well in that passage in 1 Peter 5 Peter talks about Jesus as the chief Shepherd. And then he says in v6 'Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he

cares for you.' And then he goes on, v8, 'Be sober minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion.' So, how does the devil get his teeth and claws into you? In two ways Peter says: through pride –the opposite of humility - and through anxiety. Pride that's at the heart of all our sin, that says I can do life on my own. I don't need a shepherd. I'm not vulnerable, and I don't need to watch out. And through anxieties and worries that can cripple you – because you feel vulnerable to all these worries about life, and money, and the future, and the kids. And the lion gets his claws into you, and the wolf his teeth.

And so because we're vulnerable, we need a guide who will lead us to real pasture. We need a protector who will save us from our enemies.

Your Shepherd

Look at v11-12: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees." So the hired hand, because he doesn't own the sheep, he doesn't care about them, not really. The sheep are not what is most valuable to him. What's of most value to him is his life. And it's not the sheep he's in it for, it's the money, it's just a job, and it's more than his job's worth to stand in the way of a wolf.

But the good shepherd is very different, isn't he. Because he *does* own the sheep. The sheep *are* what most matters to him. To him the sheep are incredibly valuable. So when the wolf comes he doesn't run – he stands.

So, listen, amongst all the other stuff that this image of sheep and shepherd tells you, about how stupid and vulnerable we are, it also tells you that you are of inestimable worth to the shepherd. And though he knows you to the very depths of your being, though he knows you better than you know yourself, the Shepherd doesn't despise you, or run from you, or abandon you, he loves you and values you, more than you or anyone else ever could.

And Jesus says, "I am that good shepherd." And that's an incredible thing to say. You see, the one other place in the Bible where this image of good and bad shepherds is used is Ezekiel chapter 34. And in that passage, just as Jesus does here, the Lord takes the religious leaders of the day to task for not caring for the flock: "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" (Ezek 34:3-4). And because they have failed to do it, God says that he himself will come and be the shepherd.

And now here is Jesus saying, "And I've come. I'm the good shepherd and I've come for you – to guide you and to protect you and to feed you." And this shepherd doesn't just stand his ground when the wolf comes – he lays his life down. And at the cross, in the glorious paradox of the gospel, the Shepherd became a lamb, and Jesus gave his life for us, the sheep. And all those times we stray, all those times we go running off, feeding in wrong pastures, all those times when in doubt and unbelief we give way to fear and anxiety, he takes it all

upon himself: The Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. And whilst normally, if the wolf could kill the shepherd, it would mean certain death for the sheep, in this Shepherd's death there is certain life for all who will trust him.

So, whilst the gospel tells us we are more sheep-like, more needy, more sinful, than we would ever dare admit; it also tells us we are more loved and valued than we could ever dare imagine.

You see, that sheep farmer I met wondered why he had given up the City, and a profitable career, to rescue sheep. But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, gave up a far greater city, a far more glorious position, to rescue you, and he has no regrets.

The One You're to Follow

And it's by knowing that Christ is your Shepherd that you can follow him. Verse 3-4, "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out… and the sheep follow him."

And as we close, I want to give you just a few ways that following Jesus as your Shepherd will show itself in your life.

Number 1, ***your identity***. Last summer a cow jumped over the fence and into our garden, and started eating our vegetable patch. And I had to run and get the farmer, and when he got to our house and saw the cow he started calling it by name, 'mouse, mouse'. And I'm stood there thinking – you've got names for your cows? But they're all identical! They're all brown. But the farmer knows, doesn't he.

And in v3 Jesus says that he calls his own sheep by name. And Jesus knows – he knows your name. And in the Bible a person's name says something about their identity – about who they are. And when you know that Christ is your shepherd it gives you a secure identity. You see, we're always in danger of looking to others to name us, to give us significance, and we pin our hopes on this other person, and they're the one who will lead me to abundant life. The problem is they always let us down. But when Christ is your shepherd, you know he knows you and names you, and you're secure in him.

Number 2, ***your mission***; because that's the other thing names in the Bible convey – the individual's God-given task. And you can get all screwed up in life wondering what name God has got for you, 'what's God's will for my life?' But you can only ever hope to answer what you're here for when you know what the overall point of life is, where it's all going, what story you're in. And what you discover when you get to the last book of the Bible is that it's all about this great crowd around God's throne worshipping the Lamb at the centre. He's the centre of the story, not you or me. And so when Christ is your shepherd, when you follow him, from now on you live your life for his glory. And that frees you from living for your own glory, and all the selfishness and self-centredness and comparing with others, that goes with living for yourself.

Number 3, ***those who are different*** from you. You see, Jesus says in v16, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." And Jesus is talking there about the gospel going to the Gentiles – and there will be one combined flock, Jew and Gentile together. But that also means that there are other sheep out there who need calling into the flock. So following Jesus means we will take whatever opportunities come our way to point others to the Shepherd. But it also means that when they do come in, we welcome them, whoever they are. You see, psychologists say that a large part of our identity is based on differences – we identify ourselves by who we are not like: we're not like them – whoever them is. Well, when Christ is your shepherd, your identity isn't based on how different you are to *them*, it's based on him, and that frees you to welcome *them*, whoever they are!

But number 4, ***your obedience***. You see, Western shepherds drive their flocks, but eastern shepherds lead them. And Jesus says his sheep will be led by him. And that means we cannot compartmentalise our lives – and think 'well, I'll listen to Jesus, he can be my shepherd in *this* area of my life, but when it comes to my money, or my sex life, or my career, I'm going to stay a free grazer.' No. To follow Jesus means that your whole life, your whole world, is going to be shaped by him – because you're following in his footsteps, not finding your own path. So Christ is not just your shepherd, he's your shepherd king.

And that means you can trust and obey, not just in every *area* of your life, but in every *time* of your life. You see, you can be tempted to think that when everything's going well and working out, then Jesus must be with you, and it's easy to follow him. But when things aren't going well, you can be tempted to think, 'where's Jesus now I'm in this hole, now the water's up to my neck.' And then the danger is that you think you should ditch following the shepherd, and make your own way.

But the thing about good shepherds, as Jesus makes clear in his parable in Luke 15, is that they go looking for their lost sheep. But have you ever thought how the shepherd brings that straying sheep back? Does he put a nice collar, studded with diamonds, on the sheep, and attach a lead woven in silver strands, and lead it back? No! The good shepherd grabs it, half strangling it, and wrestles it to the ground. Then he trusses its legs up and bundles it over his shoulders, and carries it, jolts, and bumps and all, home. Now, does the sheep enjoy that? Does it think, "I'm having the time of my life!' No! And yet the shepherd has just saved its life. So when you feel like you have been thrown to the ground, or smacked in the head, it's not that Jesus has abandoned you, it might just be that the Good Shepherd is rescuing you from danger.

So trust him, follow him, and obey him.