

## SERMON

**John 10:11 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'**

\*\*\*\*

The gospel of John is a book of contrasts: light and dark, life and death and, as far people are concerned, in the most simplistic of terms, those who are in and those who are out, those who would see and understand who Jesus is and those who refuse to do so. The Gospel writer proclaims who and what Jesus is: not only by what he says he is but also by what he is not. In the gospel of John there are always comparisons. The authority of human tradition and structures compared to the divine authority of Jesus. Pharisees, who are thieves and robbers, only interested in themselves, compared to Jesus and his limitless love and concern for his 'sheep'.

Concern that is evident in today's 'I am' reading. Jesus said, 'I am the good shepherd'. Not just 'I am a shepherd'. Not even 'I am the shepherd'. But 'I am the good shepherd'. By implication there are others who are 'not good' shepherds. These 'not good' shepherds - these 'bad' shepherds - may be charged to look after sheep. But they are only hired hands. Their motivation is money and self-interest. They are paid for their time. When the going gets tough they will go.

In stark contrast the relationship between the Good Shepherd and his flock is a relationship of love: a relationship of willing self-sacrifice

**Jesus said: 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'**

This a relationship based on knowledge and understanding. Jesus said: **I know my own sheep and they know me. just as my Father knows me and I know the Father.** This is a two-way relationship. The sheep recognise his voice. They know to whom they belong. They know who they can trust and who they can follow. A shepherd of those days led his sheep. He didn't drive them forward from behind but went out ahead of them. And his sheep followed him. Followed his voice. Followed the sound of his shepherd's crook as it passed alongside rocky paths.

The question for us today is: are we his sheep?

Last week Jesus said '**I am the gate**'. The response that was required of us in response to that claim is to walk through that gate, to acknowledge Jesus for who he is, to accept all he offers us and to obey all he asks of us. Today Jesus says 'I am the good shepherd' and reinforces the need for us to respond. In verse 27 of our reading Jesus says '**My sheep recognize my voice: I know them and they follow me**'. Do we recognise his voice? Do we acknowledge him as our shepherd? Do we follow where he leads?

Maybe our answer is conditional. Maybe it depends on where the path leads. If it's leading us out of danger and into safety we can say 'okay'. If its leading us from hunger and thirst into fresh water and green pasture. Again we can say 'okay'.

But what if that path leads us through cold, dark shadows or along rocky paths or beside steep cliffs where we may so easily stumble and fall? Will we still follow when the path is hard? Will we still listen for his voice or the sound of his staff upon the rock showing the way to go? Or will we turn away in fear trying to find our own road to safety? Will we try and follow the sheep scattering around us or keep our eyes on and our ears open to our shepherd?

Many of the headlines of recent days has been on the legal case of Debbie Purdy. As you are no doubt aware Ms Purdy suffers from MS [multiple sclerosis]. The Law Lords upheld her demand for clarification of the criteria which should determine whether her husband would face prosecution if he helped her commit suicide.

it is with trepidation and a great deal of humility that I am raising this issue. Who am I to talk of such things - to voice an opinion ? I admit that my own experience of death and dying is limited. I was there when my father passed away. Not without its own anxieties but physically pain free. I have stood helplessly by as two of my children - by the grace of God and the skills of others - have been saved from death. As a Minister I have travelled a little of the way with individuals and their families on the difficult road of a terminal illness. I admit I have not seen my loved ones endure excessive pain, loss of control of body and mind, loss of human dignity. Dignity which is both how we feel about ourselves and how we are treated.

I would not dare to try and say I understand what others may have gone through and my heart breaks for those who are in that living hell today but still I ask what is the voice of God saying? Where is Jesus the Good Shepherd leading us? This one of the many challenges that face us today. One of the challenges that the secular world says God - religion - the church has no relevant answer for. Because we have no chapter – no verse – no parable that we can quote. Jesus did not speak directly on issues such as euthanasia or assisted dying or suicide so where is his voice? What does his voice say to those who argue that the ‘dignity of life as more important than the sanctity of life’ [Times leader Fri 31<sup>st</sup> July]

If we are looking for Scriptural texts we can see the sixth of the Ten commandments: **Thou shall not kill** [Exodus 20:13]. But that is also understood as ‘Thou shall not murder’ to ‘allow for’ the death penalty, war, self defence. Suicide itself is no longer treated with compassion not condemnation. Should this text therefore not also allow for euthanasia or assisted dying?

Let us look elsewhere in Scripture for some answers. What does Jesus in the New Testament say about suffering? Jesus seems to say that suffering is a harsh reality of life. He warns that suffering cannot always be avoided. Suffering is not imposed by God but endured by God. Endured by God for our sakes in the person of Jesus. But also endured with us, as our companion, our comfort, our strength, in all the difficult situations of our own lives.

But Jesus throughout his ministry also relieves the suffering of many people he encountered. He reinforced God's special concern for the weak and the vulnerable - the very young and the very old - the sick - the dying - the grieving. His ministry was primarily one of love. Love in which our ultimate concern is not for ourselves but for the well being of the other. So what might he say about assisted dying - killing in love - fulfilling the wishes of the loved one who cannot act for themselves ? Where is our Shepherd's voice in this? What is the right path we are to follow?

It is not my place nor my wish to condemn anyone driven to these lengths - in desperate need - in love. But I am, as many people are, concerned that a change in legislation would result in pressure being put on those in this awful position to choose the way of assisted suicide. In the words of a recent newspaper article would 'compassionate assistance' slip into 'malicious encouragement'. [Times leader Fri 31<sup>st</sup> July ]

Nevertheless what is the greater sin, the heavier question, standing before Jesus our judge, that he will ask of society – ask of us ? Not why did you allow this person to take their life, either through their own hands or through those of others, not why did you allow this person to die this way but what did you do to prevent it becoming necessary for them to act in this way?

I believe the voice of our Shepherd is calling us to take far better care of all who are sick and dying. Too many of us are afraid to face the reality of serious illness and death,

relegating it to the hidden corners of our thinking, hoping we can avoid it as long as possible until we are forced to face it head on. Instead it is our task, our calling, to support medical research for prevention and cure. It is our calling to do all we can to provide good health care in our surgeries, clinics and hospitals. It is our calling to help develop palliative care, to encourage Marie Curie and McMillan nurses, to assist in funding the hospice movement.

I believe we are being called to reduce the fear of the future which is such a blight on the present for so many. The fear of the pain and indignity of dying. The fear of being perceived as a burden: isolated, excluded and no longer seen as worthwhile. And what we can offer to combat these fears in the name and in the power of Jesus Christ our Good Shepherd is hope. Our Shepherd leads us in hope. However dark the path we travel in hope. Not a fingers-crossed, hedging your bets, kind of hope but a sure and certain hope. Because we are following the one we trust; following the one who we know loves us more than himself; the one who lived, died and then rose again from the grave for us. Because we all following him to the place where we dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Amen