

BIBLE READINGS: Ezekiel 34:11-22 John 10:1-18

SERMON

During WWII a young Jewish woman was fleeing the German Gestapo in France. She knew she was close to being caught and was so exhausted she just wanted to give up. She came to a home and was resting when a widow came to tell her and the people who were hiding her that the Gestapo would soon arrive and that they must all flee to a new hiding place. The Jewish woman said, "It's no use, they will find me anyway." The widow, who was a Christian, said, "Yes, they will find someone here, but it's time for you to leave. Go with these people to safety - I will take your identification and wait here."

The Jewish woman then understood the plan; the Gestapo would come and find this Christian widow and think she was the fleeing Jew. She asked the widow why she was doing it. The widow responded, "It's the least I can do; Christ has already done that and more for me!"

The widow was caught and imprisoned in the Jewish lady's place, allowing her to escape. Within six months the Christian widow was dead in a concentration camp.

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He went on to say, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life, only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. The statement Jesus makes about being a good shepherd is inspiring and moves us, but does not, I believe challenge us unless we understand the consequences of his actions for us his disciples.

We can understand what Jesus says only in terms of our personal salvation. By that I mean, what Jesus has done for us - laying down his life out of love of God and his sheep. We can also see his shepherding as a symbol of how we are to live out our lives as his disciples. It is when we begin to take on the role of shepherd that we start to understand the great sacrificial love that Jesus has shown us.

We are his sheep, and we hear his voice and follow him. But Jesus doesn't want us to just follow him, he wants us to emulate him. He said later in John's Gospel - *whoever loves his own life will lose it; whoever hates his own life in this world will keep it for life eternal. Whoever wants to serve me must follow me, so that my servant will be with me where I am. And my Father will honour anyone who serves me.* 12:25,26

The challenge for us today is - are we walking the way of the Good Shepherd, or are we like the hired man, who is not a Shepherd and does not own the sheep and sees the wolf coming and runs away; so the wolf snatches the sheep and scatters them. The hired man runs away because he is only a hired man and does not care about the sheep.

The hired man does not **own the sheep**. Ownership means that to lose one of the sheep costs the owner something. In our situation, do we "own" our brothers and sisters in Christ; do we care about them as Christ does. If they are threatened, in need, ill or dying - do we care for them in anything more than a superficial way. Are we really ready to give up our time, our interests, our selves to care for them? Ownership means that the needs of the flock are the concern of the shepherd. Don't get too comfortable thinking that this is a sermon to leaders of the church - the "shepherds", because it is a sermon for everyone who is a follower of Jesus. Each of us is responsible to care for and protect the flock.

In the Old Testament the prophet Ezekiel mentions shepherds. Under the influence of God's spirit Ezekiel proclaimed God's word of judgement to the ruler's of Israel. God called them doomed for they did not care for his sheep. Then God says that he will himself look after his sheep. And then he pronounces judgement on the sheep.

I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice. "As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet? " Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. Ezek. 34:16-22

We are the sheep of the Good Shepherd, but how do we look after the weak, the lost, the sick. Are we selfish and full of greed and pride - eating the best, and destroying the rest; drinking and polluting the rest?

It's so easy to give examples of our society's selfishness. Listening to the News is enough to make you realise how self interested we are. How many die of hunger while we in our petty selfishness grow fat and strong. How is it that some Christians talk about God blessing them with wealth and power, and yet they do not give their wealth and power away to those who have none? God judges us by how we care about his flock.

Jesus condemned the Pharisees who claimed to be the shepherds - "if you were blind," he said, "then you would not be guilty; but since you claim that you can see; this means you are still guilty." (9:41)

When the wolf comes, the hired man runs away. His own life is more important to him than the life of the flock. To defend the flock from the ravages of the wolf requires courage and devotion. We might make mistakes in our battle with the wolf, but there is a world of difference between one who turns to face evil and try to protect the flock than those who run away.

Once a man and his companion were travelling through a pass high in the Himalayan Mountains. At one point they came across a body lying in the snow. The man wished to stop and help the unfortunate person, but his companion refused, saying, "We shall lose our lives if we burden ourselves with this dying one!"

But the man would not think of leaving the person to die in the ice and snow. So his companion bade him farewell. With a great effort, the man lifted the poor traveller onto his back, and continued on his way. Gradually the heat from his body began to warm up the poor frozen traveller. Soon both were walking together. Catching up to his former companion they found him dead - frozen by the cold.

The hired man runs away because he is only a hired man, and does not care about the sheep. Our calling is to care for the sheep - to follow in the way of the Good Shepherd who willingly lay down his life for us. We who would follow him can do no less. Either we lay down our lives for those God loves - which is everyone - or like the Pharisees and the rulers of Israel who claimed to care but actually were interested only in themselves, we will be condemned as hired help.

Do you care about others? Or is self-interest your motivation? You can do what is right, just as the hired man does - caring for the sheep only so long as there is some benefit in it for you, and as long as there is no personal danger. But God will not recognise you - you will not enter into eternal life. It is only as you care for others, as you seek to protect others by facing the wolf - that you will know eternal life and experience it abundantly.