

Good Under-Shepherds

In the name of him in whom we have washed our robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, dear friend in Christ: the familiar image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is certainly the favorite of many Christians; and I think that's because it's an allusion that's at once very simple to grasp and yet at the same time very rich in meaning. I mean you think of sheep: pretty much defenseless and not too bright. That's a good description of us – especially in a spiritual sense. And then you've got the shepherd: he's the guy with the plan, the know-how, and the big stick. It's an image that conveys ideas of Christ's care and protection for us – and also his authority over us. It speaks of his leading and feeding us, and his always acting in our best interest – even to the point of laying down his life to defend and save us. It's all captured by this single word portrait of the Good Shepherd. And something more, there is the issue of *relationship* and *personal knowledge* that Jesus mentions in this morning's Gospel lesson. He says, "I *know* my sheep and they *know* me. They recognize my voice and they follow me."

And that part of the Good Shepherd illustration may be a bit unfamiliar to us. That's because in this country and in places like England and Australia where they raise a lot of sheep, they normally drive their flocks from place to place with trained sheep dogs. The shepherds themselves deal mostly with their dogs rather than the sheep. But that's not the way they used to do it in ancient cultures. Instead, shepherds actually led their flocks. They still do today in many places in the Middle East. And the sheep really did know how to recognize the voice of their own shepherd. Just for example, most villages in Jesus' day would have had sort of a communal sheep pen somewhere on the edge of town where they'd keep all the flocks together for protection overnight. Then in the morning the shepherds would come and call their own sheep out to take them to pasture, whichever way they wanted to go. And though the flocks would be all mixed up together in the pen, they wouldn't have to waste any time separating them. The sheep knew which shepherd they were supposed to go with. They'd hear his voice and follow him. They couldn't be fooled either. I've actually read of experiments where people have dressed up like the shepherd of a particular flock and tried to imitate his voice to see if they could trick them into following. It doesn't work. As stupid as sheep are, they won't fall for that one. They know the voice of their one true shepherd.

And it's this idea that I'd like to explore a bit deeper on this Good Shepherd Sunday. Jesus is our Good Shepherd. We'd all agree with that. And that means we ought to recognize his voice and follow him, right? But wait a minute: none of us has ever seen Jesus *or* heard his voice – not in person anyway. Now there may be someone who says, "Yes, sure. I saw Jesus this morning. He appeared to me in my room and this is what he said to me ..." but I think we'd all agree that such a person was either a pathological liar or due for an extended stay in a mental health facility. Jesus is present with us and he does speak to us; but not that way.

No, instead we understand that Jesus establishes and maintains a relationship with us by his inspired Word recorded in the Holy Scriptures and he does this primarily through the ministry of his Church. We don't see Jesus. He doesn't speak to us *directly*. And yet we do hear his voice spoken by others – primarily by those he appoints to shepherd his flock under his direction. As a matter of fact, in the Scripture readings we had last week, we heard about Jesus appointing two people to be shepherds (or rather under-shepherds) for him. First we heard about Jesus accosting Saul – or as he is better known to us, the apostle *Paul* – while he was on his way to Damascus to arrest and persecute Christians. He was, as you recall, rather forcibly made to change his plans. We heard how Jesus called him to be his messenger to the Gentiles. Paul was to be the one through whom the voice of the Good Shepherd would call, gather, and feed the other flocks that Jesus once told his disciples he had besides the faithful of the Jewish nation. And then in last week's Gospel reading, we had the account of Jesus restoring Peter to the role of apostle after his threefold denial of the Lord on the night of his arrest. In the process of restoring Peter, Jesus told him three times to "take care of" or "feed my sheep".

From these examples a couple things are clear: first that no under-shepherd for Jesus is self-appointed; rather Jesus himself selects certain individuals and appoints them to serve his Church in specific times and places. Secondly, it's pretty obvious that when Jesus does this, he picks men who are flawed, who have weaknesses, who make mistakes and so on. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is perfect; but he has chosen to work in his Church through fallen sinners – so in an absolute sense there is no such thing as a good under-shepherd. None of them is going to be perfect like he is. And yet, in a comparative sense, some are going to be better than others. So, with that in mind, the question is what is it that makes someone a good under-shepherd for Jesus? What are the qualities and standards of performance required?

We find the answers we need in this morning's reading from the book of Acts. There we hear from Paul again, now some twenty years or so after his conversion to Christ. A lot has happened in those twenty years. He's now just wrapping up his third and longest mission journey to date. This one has taken him into Asia Minor (that's modern-day Turkey) and on into Greece. He's spent the majority of his time, some three years altogether, headquartered in the city of Ephesus. From there he's been planting Christian congregations throughout the city itself and the surrounding regions, as well as building up and developing the congregations he planted in other cities on previous mission trips. At this point he is the spiritual father of probably several dozen churches. And now, as he is getting ready to depart the area for what he believes to be the last time, he calls for a meeting of the elders – that is the pastors that he has appointed to lead all these different congregations. He wants to give them their final instructions and tell them how to be good under-shepherds for Jesus in his absence. It's the first pastors' conference on record. (And from the sound of it, it was a whole lot better than the ones I have to go to from time to time.)

But before I go on here, I want to head off what might be an objection to covering this today. Someone might be thinking, "This stuff sounds like it's for pastors. Why do the rest of us need to know it?" There are several reasons. One is that to some extent almost everyone has some shepherding duties in the church. The Elders, Church Council, Board of Education, Board of Evangelism, Sunday Schoolteachers, and every parent and grandparent is involved to some degree in shepherding someone for Jesus. Also you have a duty to the person who is your appointed shepherd, whether me or whoever Christ places here, to hold them accountable for how they discharge their responsibilities. Third, it's part of the whole counsel of God we've been given, therefore we should know it. And finally, you should know it because you never know when you may be involved in locating a new under-shepherd for your church. It can come up rather unexpectedly – as our neighbors at St. John discovered so recently. It's best to know in advance what to look for. (And no, in case you're wondering, I don't have any plans to leave – it just came up in today's readings. That's all.)

So, with all that in mind, what is it that makes for a good under-shepherd? Well, it happens that the apostle Paul isn't shy about holding himself up as a good example for the others to follow. And this isn't prideful boasting on his part; it's simply the lack of false humility. The truth is that Paul has proven himself to be a good under-shepherd and he knows it. It's right that he passes his own tough standards to the pastors he leaves behind to carry on the work of the Church. He begins by saying, "You know how I've lived among you ... *serving* the Lord with all *humility* ..." You see, it all starts with the question of attitude. Though a pastor is a leader in the church, he needs to understand that it is a leadership of service to the Lord. It's the Lord's flock, never his. And he needs to approach his duties with fear and trembling knowing that one day he will be called to account for his stewardship. For this same reason the Scripture elsewhere declares that not many should seek to be teachers in the church because they will be judged according to a higher standard.

And teaching is the main part of the pastor's task – that's how the voice of the Good Shepherd is heard. Paul says "I did not shrink back from declaring to you anything that was profitable, in public and from house to house." He understood that it was his job to teach the Words of Jesus both from the pulpit to the assembled congregation and to individuals one on one in their own homes – and he wanted the pastors to do the same thing. What were they to teach? Paul says, "the whole counsel of God". It sometimes happens that pastors and people get stuck on one or two notes and deal with the same issues over and over again, or they find that some sections of Scripture deal with issues they think are just too sensitive to address, so they skip or avoid them. But Paul says that he is innocent of the blood of the people precisely because he has declared the whole counsel of God. By implication, he's saying that a pastor who fails to address certain issues is guilty – guilty of murder. He's referring to that portion of the book of Ezekiel in which the Lord tells the prophet that if he fails to warn a sinner to repent and turn from his way, the prophet himself will be guilty of the man's death in

sin. I for one would hate to be in the shoes of one of the many pastors today who are teaching their people that adultery, divorce, abortion, fornication, homosexuality, and who knows what else that God has very clearly condemned are now okay.

Only by calling sinners to repent of their sin can the pastor testify to the Gospel of God's grace in Christ Jesus. That's what it's really all about. The pastor must tear down, boldly, fearlessly attacking sin in whatever form it takes precisely so that he can also proclaim God's forgiveness in Christ. That's what builds up the kingdom of God and gives eternal life to those who trust in him. And that's why Paul says that it doesn't matter what happens to him. He knows that he's going to Jerusalem where he is going to get in a lot of trouble for teaching the things he does. He knows that he is going to be arrested and spend time in prison. I suspect that he also knows that he will eventually be martyred—but it doesn't matter to him. That's because he understands that it isn't about him. It's never about the messenger. It's about the powerful, life-giving message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Good under-shepherds need to understand that.

And they need to understand that because of it, that's where Satan will make his attack. Paul warns his hearers that he knows that after he departs "fierce wolves" will come in and do terrible damage to the flock. He's speaking of false teachers who by their distorted doctrines will undermine the central truth and power of the Gospel. The church is in constant danger of this. But sometimes it's easier or more comfortable for us to overlook it. I know that sometimes people don't understand, and they get offended when I or some other pastor or Bible teacher points out an error in doctrine that should be avoided. But you have only to look at the epistles of St. Paul, and you'll see that he spends the majority of his time correcting errors and emphatically rejecting the doctrines of false teachers. Sometimes he's pretty sharp and cutting about it. And here he says, "for three years I've been admonishing you night and day with tears in my eyes, warning you to be alert." I'd say he means it. It's not enough for a pastor to say what is true; he must also say what is not true and should be rejected and condemned.

He also warns the pastors to be careful of themselves. On one hand, because there really is power in the Gospel, people are going to be appreciative for what they receive from their pastors – it only makes sense. And to tell you the truth, it's pretty heady stuff to be looked up to and admired for doing a pastor's job – which is why there is always a danger that people are valuing the teacher more than they value the words of Christ they are receiving from the teacher. At that point the church becomes the personality cult of the pastor. That's a formula for ruin for both the pastor and the church. Another danger for the pastor is that he look upon his calling as a means to enrich himself. I don't need to tell you that there are a lot of so-called ministries out there that are just that: businesses designed to make a profit in the name of the Lord. According to Paul, the pastor is entitled to a living, not to a life of luxury. And so he says that he coveted no one's gold or silver indicating that they should follow his example. If the church has accrued wealth, it should be put to work for the kingdom of God or distributed to those in need. It's in *giving* not *receiving* that the church and the pastor are blessed.

And that pretty well wraps up what Paul has to say to the under-shepherds he leaves behind in and around Ephesus. In closing, he encourages them all to be faithful to the Word, and he commends them all to the love of God and the power of the Gospel of his grace which is able to build them up so that they can perform their duties and have a share in the final inheritance with the saints. And that of course is the ultimate goal of the pastor: to be the voice of the Good Shepherd calling his sheep to follow Jesus through this life so that they may partake with him of the life to come.

That this may happen, let us never cease to pray that Christ our Lord will continue to call and appoint good and faithful under-shepherds for his church. And on a personal note, I ask that you pray also for me that I will have the humility of heart to serve, the wisdom of the Spirit to discern the truth, and the boldness the apostle Paul to declare the whole counsel of God to you, in Jesus name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!