

## **Sunday 8 May – Fourth Sunday of Easter**

### **Sermon by Wendy Borgartz**

When I looked at the set readings for today the one thing that struck me and would not go away was 'sheep'. In the end I concluded that was what I was meant to talk about today. Our Gospel this morning is the passage just after Jesus says he is the good shepherd and the gateway for the sheep. The set Psalm for today is Psalm 23, The Lord is my shepherd. Then in our reading from Revelation we hear about Christ as the Lamb becoming the shepherd.

For the Jewish people of first century Israel, shepherds and sheep and lambs would have been commonplace. For us today, even living as we do in a relatively rural part of Essex, they are far less part of day-to-day life, and the way we farm sheep now is very different. When I think of sheep and sheep farming and shepherds, I think of programmes like 'One Man and his Dog' with sheepdogs following whistles and calls from a shepherd to get the sheep to go where the shepherd wants them. Or I think of the stories of James Herriott and sheep farming in the Yorkshire Dales in the 1930s and 1940s and lambs being born, often with problems solved by one or other of the vets.

The Monday night Bible study group did a series on Psalm 23 a few years ago, and as part of that I did some research on shepherding in Bible times and on sheep. As today, sheep were kept for their meat and wool, but also for their milk. If you have more than a few sheep, they need to move to new pastures regularly, so someone was needed to move the sheep around, keeping the flock together and safe, dealing with shearing and milking them for cheese. Shepherding may have been one of the first paid professions, as many were wage earners, often the younger sons of a farming family who did not inherit any land, although sometimes they were unpaid family members. Shepherding was mainly a job for solitary men without children.

Sheep are stubborn and self-willed creatures; they will wander away from the trail and get lost. So, the shepherd went ahead of the sheep, making himself visible and calling so they could follow his voice also. And aren't we also stubborn and self-willed, wanting our own way, sometimes selfish, are we always ready to listen and obey what we know God wants us to do? We learn through the Bible and the church how Jesus behaved and how God wants us to live our lives, but like humanity all through from the start of creation we fail to follow, we wander off, we behave badly. It is quite easy to see ourselves as the sheep.

But what of the shepherd image? Jesus says to the Jews in the portico of Solomon outside the Temple ...'you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.' He is telling them that they are not part of his flock of sheep, because they don't listen properly to what he is saying, perhaps they don't want to understand. Or perhaps it is because what Jesus is saying to them is so contrary to their preconceived ideas, they just can't move past them to really hear and understand.

At the start of the reading, we are told that this is happening at the time of the festival of the Dedication in Jerusalem, which is also called Hanukkah. This is a festival lasting 8 days, usually in December, and it is celebrating the rededication of the Temple in 165 BC. After the Babylonian exile, some of the Jews went back to Judah, rebuilt the Temple and were allowed to celebrate their faith, while still under the rule of the Persians. Then Alexander the Great and the Greeks defeated the Persians and took charge, the Jews were still permitted to observe their laws, but the Greeks wanted to make their empire more united by language and culture. After Alexander's death, his empire was divided between his generals and Judah eventually came under the rule of the Seleucids, who were from Syria and Mesopotamia. Antiochus Epiphanes ruled between 175 and 164 BC, and he tried to wipe out the Jewish religion, ending up by erecting a statue of Zeus and sacrificing a pig in the Temple itself. Opposition to Antiochus was led by Mattathias and his five sons, one of whom was Judas Maccabeus. The Maccabees managed to defeat Antiochus and keep Judah independent until the Romans came along in 63 BC.

One of the things Judas Maccabeus did was to organize the cleansing and rededication of the Temple. The rededication of the Temple was celebrated for 8 days, and it was decreed that the whole nation of the Jews should celebrate these days every year. Jews still celebrate Hanukkah to this day, lighting a candle every day for 8 days and eating special food. The story of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabees is in the Apocrypha, which is included in some Bibles, but not all of them.

Coming back to our Gospel reading, the Jews were celebrating Hanukkah, remembering the triumph in war of the Maccabees over the Seleucids, which allowed them to cleanse the Temple. Through the Old Testament the term shepherd is often used for the King, as well as for God, so they would have understood Jesus calling himself the good shepherd as Jesus calling himself the King. When Jesus was talking about this, at the time of Hanukkah, they would

probably have had their minds full of Kings of the type they had before, winning wars, recreating the Jewish nation and the Temple.

How often do we get fixated on something, we are so sure we are right about, that we can completely miss the truth? I work as an accountant and I often misread the figures I am looking at, and then spend ages trying to make what I am working on balance or agree to something it should agree to, purely because I have got it into my brain that it is a certain number, when it is wrong. No matter how long I look at it, I cannot see the right answer, even though it is staring me in the face. Often, I have to leave it and come back to it the next day, when suddenly I fall in and realise what I have done wrong.

I sometimes wonder if that is what the Jewish leaders were doing when they met Jesus. They were so convinced the Messiah, when he came, would be like Judas Maccabeus or David or Solomon, someone to lead them in battle and defeat the Romans, that they totally failed to understand what Jesus was saying to them. Jesus was completely radical, he was turning upside down all the pre-conceived ideas of Kingship of the time, and they really could not understand him. Every time Jesus used one of his 'I am' sayings, such as I am the Good Shepherd, they were reminded of God telling Moses his name in Exodus Chapter 3 verse 14, where in response to Moses asking God what he should tell the Israelites is the name of the person sending Moses to them, God tells Moses to tell them that "I AM has sent me to you." This would have been so shocking to them, that they would not have gone beyond that shock to think about what Jesus was saying. Were they like me with my numbers, unable to recognise what was being said?

Do we get fixated on what we think the Gospels mean? Do we get ideas into our heads about God and Jesus and find it difficult to hear something new or something different? Or do we approach the Bible with open minds and an expectation that we can read a passage and suddenly find something new within it we had not noticed before? One of the joys I have found in the further study I am undertaking as part of my training is the sudden light bulb moments when something turns on its head and suddenly becomes obvious, yet I had never thought of it that way before. Those are the moments that excite me, that make me want to share what I have just discovered with others (usually my husband or the Monday night Bible study group). I pray that we may all enjoy such moments in the week ahead, that we receive new insights we can share with others, because we are part of Jesus' flock, we are His disciples, and we are ready and listening to hear His voice. Amen.