29th April 2012

John 10:11-18 - **"The Good Shepherd"**

Today is vocations Sunday. An opportunity to reflect on our calling as Christians and our shared ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. I will use this passage where Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd to reflect on the ministry we bear in the name of Jesus, and also how this pastoral model of shepherd and sheep has been used to compare the relationship of minsters with their congregations, our their flock. In doing so I shall also reflect generally on the nature of leadership – and the model of Jesus for the type of leader who we can respect.

I remember once visiting someone and being confronted by a less than friendly dog. Though I tried to step away, the mutt started to get its teeth into his leg. Belatedly from the doorway a person hollered, ‘oh! Don’t bite him – he’s the minster!’

This incident, gives cause to reflect on this person’s remark. Was the concern directed primarily toward the minster of the animal? Was it fear of food poisoning for the dog or fright that God might unleash divine revenge on a favourite pet? Perhaps the dog was permitted to bite anyone but the minster – clergy discount! Or it might be a rabies scare – you never know if the minster was carrying something!

*Misunderstandings of the meanings of Christina ministry not only exist but flourish. The stereotypical portrait of a minster as a holy person, a breed apart, oddly different from the rest of humanity, needing special care and treatment, is a traditional heresy. Likewise the sketch of the minister as a second class citizen, deprived of political rights and responsibilities, often emerges. Some even seek to paint all minsters alike – colourless, joyless, sexless creatures – as if God used ministerial training colleges to create human photocopies.*

*In Herman Melville’s novel Moby Dick, there is an episode in which the chaplain addresses the crew: ‘shipmates, God has laid but one hand on you; both his hands press down upon me’. Such a declaration adds drama but substitute’s fiction for fact. God places different, but equal, demands on clergy and laity. Double standards of morality or ministry are unsupportable. Both laity and clergy are called to exercise Christ’s ministry in Church and society. Each of us must find the locus of service to humanity in our own vocation.*

Since biblical days many provocative and profound images of ministry have enlivened the imagination and empowered the people of God. The wounded healer, the prophet, the servant. Arguably the dominant image of the minster, the pastor, the priest, has been the pastoral one. The shepherd and his flock.

Jesus of course called himself the Good Shepherd.

The background to this is that God is described as the ‘shepherd’ in the Old Testament (for example, see Psalm 23:1; Isaiah 40:11). Later, in the New Testament, Jesus came to be described as the ‘great Shepherd of the sheep’ (Hebrews 13:20), ‘the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls’ (1 Peter 2:25), and the ‘Chief Shepherd’ of God’s flock (1 Peter 5:4).

* Jesus wants to give us fullness of life

Many people think that God wants to take things away from us. They think that God wants to destroy their fun. Jesus says that, in fact, the opposite is the case. It is the ‘thief’ who comes only to steal, kill and destroy (John 10:10a). By contrast, Jesus says, ‘I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full’ (v.10b). This has been my experience. In a relationship with Jesus we find meaning, purpose, fulfilment, peace, forgiveness, and life in all its fullness.

Shepherd may not be the most contemporary image of Christian ministry. Some models may border on dead metaphors. In a culture in which the verb ‘preach’ has negative connotations of judgemental moralizing and a lack of genuine dialogue, the traditional portrait of a ‘preacher’ is more problematic. The ‘shepherd’ image, as precious as it is to most Christians historically, may have lost some of its communicative power in a time when people are no longer agrarian. Additionally, few contemporary congregations care to be characterized as ‘sheep’, for that comparison evokes a degree of ‘dumbness’ and passivity is not prized. Dependency is not good – you need to take responsibility for your own life and faith and relationship with God. In a deep way we need to be dependent on each other – or more accurately inter dependent. No man is an island – and we need each other. But we also need each other to be responsible and independent as much as possible.

We should encourage each other to feed on what is good, to find the good pasture and life in all its fullness. Often like sheep we have gone astray. We pray for those who have wandered off – or find themselves in trouble – pray to the Good Shepherd to go and find them to lead them back to good pasture.

* Jesus wants us to know how much he loves us

Jesus contrasts the good shepherd with the ‘hired hand’. ‘The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep’ (vv.12–13).

On the other hand, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (vv.11,15). This is entirely voluntary: ‘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’ (vv.17–18). On another occasion Jesus says, ‘Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’ (John 15:13). If we ever doubt that God loves us we simply have to look at the cross: Jesus laid down his life for us.

Modern society sees leaders as often looking after number one – in it for themselves and what they can get. Greatness for the world is like a pyramid, with the greatest at the top and the rest scrambling to reach higher levels with fewer equals and more subordinates. Robert Greenleaf in his book ‘servant leadership’ suggested that the great leader is seen as servant first. People do not readily accept authority in other persons. In other eras, just to be selected as say a teacher or appointed as a minister brought immediate respect and trust. Now Greenleaf says: ‘the only authority deserving ones allegiance is that authority which if freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant nature of the leader. Those who are granted the permission and power to lead are those who prove to be servants first.

The definition of a true shepherd is that he’s isn’t in it for his own profit. In fact the supreme test of what he’s in it for will come when he’s faced with a choice. A predator appears – a lion, a wolf or a bear. You can tell the difference between the true shepherd and the false one by what they do. The false shepherd saves his prospects at the cost of his reputation. The true shepherd shows who he is by being prepared to die for the sheep. The sheep are facing danger; the shepherd will go to meet it.

The issue of true and false shepherds was a one of the topics at the School of Theology the other night. We were talking about the Donatist Controversy of the second century

. The Donatists refused to accept the sacraments and [spiritual authority](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostolic_Succession) of the priests and bishops who had fallen away from the faith during the persecution. During the persecution some Church leaders had gone so far as to turn Christians over to Roman authorities and had handed over religious texts to authorities to be publicly burned.[[*citation needed*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed)] These people were called [*traditores*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditores) ("people who had handed over"). These traditors had returned to positions of authority under [Constantine I](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantine_I), and the Donatists proclaimed that any sacraments celebrated by these priests and bishops were invalid. Donatists were rigorists, holding that the church must be a church of "saints," not "sinners,” The Catholic position, according to Augustine, was [ex opere operato](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ex_opere_operato) — *from the work having been worked*; in other words, that the validity of the sacrament depends upon the holiness of God, the minister being a mere instrument of God's work, so that any priest or bishop, even one in a state of [mortal sin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mortal_sin), who speaks the formula of the sacrament with valid matter and the intent of causing the sacrament to occur acts validly. To Catholics, a person who received the Eucharist from the hands of even an unrepentant sinning priest still received Christ's Body and Blood, their own sacramental life being undamaged by the priest's faults.

I shared how before I became a minster, when I was a ‘normal person’, myself and another elder of the church discovered that our minster was having an adulterous relationship with another elder. We met with the minster and confronted him about the situation. He was unrepentant and we were greatly disturbed. Two days later we had Sunday worship and it was a communion service and I remember hesitating as to whether I could receive communion from this man. Not aware at that time of the great Donatist controversy, I took the sacrament. I was in my early twenties at the time, and had just started the candidating for the ministry. The whole episode brought home to me the precariousness of Christina ministry and the cost of it. I realized then that no one is perfect - as is sometimes said in the communion prayers – Lord I am unworthy – but just say the word and I shall be healed. I had had respect for this minister and was now trying to cope with this fall from grace and disillusionment with his ministry. It took me some time to realize that God can work through any of us, flawed though we are. Light shines through the cracks of the clay jars, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Corinthians. There but for the Grace of God could go any of us. So many leave the church because they have a rigid view of what the church ought to be. They can’t adjust to the reality they experience. Ambiguity always characterizes a local congregation. Those who seek to serve it cannot be intolerant of imperfection. Quite the opposite – you have to have a tolerance for warts and all. We all stand in the need for forgiveness and grace.

We do have expectations of any leaders. But on one is superhuman. Anyone who seeks perfection is ultimately going to find sinfulness. If we do reach a higher or more holy level of living, we inevitably have sinful feelings of pride at our accomplishments and compare ourselves in superior fashion to others whom we may feel have not given their full energies a moral or spiritual reform. Many people suffer from the burden of the ideal self-image. Seeking to fulfill such an unrealistic self-descriptive norm can be self-destructive. By all means have ideals – but don’t let them beat you up when you miss the mark. We live by grace not by law.

The hired hand is a distorted image of ministry. This mercenary metaphor suggest that clergy should do what they are hired to do – namely serve the needs of the congregations paying their salaries. Pocketbook politics reduces the freedom of the pulpit and restrains the minister from church and community involvements that may be in harmony with scripture but outside the spirit of those who pay the bills. That’s why in the URC churches do not directly pay the stipends of their minsters – but church give money to the national church which then pays the stipends of the minsters. It tries to allow minsters to be truly prophetic and not treated like or feel compelled to act like, a hired hand. We are unleashed and dangerous! With a mind of our own – well hopefully the mind of Christ.

*For much of Christina history the image of the church has been that of an institution expecting to be served rather than that of a serving institution. Church structures have been seen as an ends in themselves. People and money have poured in but little flowed out to the surrounding communities. When the church has been seen as the dispenser of sacraments essential to salvation or the power broker setting the standards and morals, then ministry has often been captive to clergy domination and authoritarian styles have imprisoned people*.

How awesome it is to imagine that the Almighty could care enough to enter humbly into this universe for the sake of saving humanity. We are so familiar with describing Jesus as the good Shepherd that we fail to stop and let that description take our breath away – that the Lord of all should be our shepherd, laying down his life for his sheep.

Consequently those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ follow his ministry. The towel and the basin, not pomp and power are the symbols of redemptive ministry. We can discover in the words of Martin Luther king that

‘Everyone can be great. Because everyone can serve. You don’t need to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato or Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of thermo dynamics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.

There is prayer for the preparation of daily service that goes;

‘Lord make us the masters of ourselves that we might become the servants of others’.

One of the dangers of being a servant leader, of being a shepherd, is that you don’t simply resolve the paradox by stressing either the servant or the leadership dimension to the exclusion of the other. Those called to leadership need to live and work in tension or balance with these two aspects – being a servant and a leader all that is implied in being a shepherd.

Being a shepherd requires a degree of power. Power itself is a neutral term. Too often it is associated in negative terms, such as power to control or manipulate another. But service of any kind requires a degree of power if one is to accomplish anything of value. A judicious use of power provides opportunities for service in the name of mercy and justice. Many organisations and churches are hurt more by the lack of leadership than by the domination of leadership. A laissez faire or laid back attitude can lead to drift and an inability to fulfil the functions of the organisation.

* Jesus wants to be in a relationship with us

The sheep know the shepherd’s voice: ‘The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice’ (vv.3–4).

The sheep *know* the shepherd: ‘I am the good shepherd; I *know* my sheep and my sheep *know* me – just as the Father *knows* me and I *know* the Father’ (vv.14–15). The one we know not only dies for us but he also rises from the dead for us. He has the power to take his life again: ‘I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again’ (v.18b). He gives us eternal life.

Jesus later defines eternal life like this: ‘Now this is eternal life: that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent’ (17:3).

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, "When a chap is in love, he will go out in all kinds of weather to keep an appointment with his beloved. Love can be demanding; in fact, more demanding than law. It has its own imperatives. Think of a mother sitting by the bedside of a sick child through the night, impelled only by love. Nothing is too much trouble for love." Jesus makes it clear as he draws near the cross that his motivation is love. He is choosing to make this sacrifice. He is choosing to be faithful to what God has put before him.

There is a saying that "Fear is the shadow of courage". Courageous people are not people without fear! Jesus showed courage in going to the cross. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane was full of anguish. But courageous people choose to put to one side their fears and follow the path of love and trust in God. They focus not on the shadow but they follow the light. The Good Shepherd who faced his fears and lay down his life for us – walks with us through the dark valleys of life – his rod and his staff can comfort us. He has the power to save – he has the power to keep us safe. Our job is to listen for his voice – to stay close by him.

Christian Ministry in all its forms, whether in the church or in the world, is more than just a call to do something; it is a challenge to be someone who loves and cares in the name of Jesus Christ, and who loves and acres for Jesus as much as Jesus loves and cares for us. . We can get hung up on what we are called to do that we miss the primary point of what it means to be Christian – what we are called to be – a follower of Jesus Christ in whatever situation we find ourselves. The Christian ministry of clergy and laity is far more than roles and functions and tasks. For identity’s sake, one must drink deeply of something stronger than titles and tasks. It is dangerous to define oneself solely by what one does. We dare not confuse functional roles with the issue of who we are as persons. Basing one’s self on success or failure in job roles can be like sinking in sand. Who we are ultimately is a gift of grace, not a work of merit.

The shepherd loves us, we are the sheep of his pasture, let us let him be our Shepherd. There was a little girl who was asked to recite the 23rd Psalm. She stood up to speak tin front of a packed church and started off’. The Lord is my Shepherd, that’s all I want….

Lord, thank you that you love us so much that you laid down your life for us. Thank you for making it possible for us to know you, to speak to you, and to hear your voice speaking to us. Thank you that you give us life and life in all its fullness