

Acts 4:5-12
John 10:11-18

I am the Good Shepherd

When we are learning things – especially things that are new or a little bit complicated – a good illustration can make all the difference. It helps to ground what might be an abstract concept in reality, and therefore helps us see a truth that we couldn't see so easily before. It also helps us remember things more easily.

As an example I want to talk briefly about learning to ski. When you ski, sometimes it's helpful to have your skis pointing inwards. This can slow you down quite quickly – something that can be really important – particularly when you are learning to ski. At other times you want to go a bit faster – going faster makes it easier to control the skis - and if you want to do that you need to have your skis parallel.

And when I was learning to ski this was taught by using the illustrations of pizza and chips. To slow down you need your skis making the shape of a slice of pizza; to speed up they need to be like a chip. Pizza and chips. Great for those of us who know and love pizza and chips, but probably not so good for someone from rural China who wouldn't know what a pizza was and had never see a chip. The illustration then would just make things more complicated.

Sometimes it seems to me the illustrations in the Bible make things more complicated rather than less; where they are supposed to be shedding light on things and making them easier to understand, they actually create a bit of a fog and make it harder to see. The culture in which we live is so different from 1st century Israel that illustrations cease to make things clear.

Take today's illustration. I am the good shepherd. How does that help us to understand who Jesus is and what he came to do? My guess would be that at first glance it doesn't help too much.

Any illustration needs to resonate with both our culture and our experience.

Of course for the people Jesus was speaking to it did. A shepherd was an everyday sight. Caring for and protecting the sheep, leading them to pasture, keeping watch over them, knowing them each as individuals. Always on the lookout for their wellbeing. Everyone who heard what he was saying would have a good knowledge of what the shepherd he was describing was all about.

And the concept of a shepherd was in their national culture, their history as well. In the Old Testament of scripture which they would have known inside out the idea of a shepherd and his sheep was often used to illustrate the relationship between the king and the people. In Ezekiel for example, the ideal king is pictured as a shepherd – maybe after the shepherd

king, the great king David – the king after God’s own heart. They saw a model king as one who had an intimate knowledge of his subjects and a desire to protect and care for them.

So when Jesus said “I am the Good Shepherd” they would have immediately known what he was really saying. I am your true king. And my rule will be a just and gentle rule. I will put your wellbeing above all and, like a shepherd, will be willing to place my life on the line for yours.

So, now we understand what the illustration is all about, what can we learn from it? How will it make a difference in the way we live?

First, that Jesus is our King. We’ve spoken a bit in recent weeks about the Kingdom of God and Jesus being King is surely the key to understanding what that is all about. If we live with Jesus as our King, then the lives we lead will be the kinds of lives that reflect this and show others what he is like. But we do have to rid ourselves of our ingrained ideas of kingship. We need to get back to that shepherd king concept – the king who cares for his subjects and will do all he can to protect them.

Our Queen is good at reflecting something of this ideal in the way she carries out her role, although her “authority” is somewhat limited in our constitutional monarchy. But most of the rulers we encounter in life seem much more concerned with their own reputations and wealth than with those they are ruling. Witness what is going on in Government at the moment with so many of our leading politicians all too ready to line their own pockets and much less ready to care for the needy.

Accepting Jesus as our king means doing what he tells us to do; no longer being driven by our own desires, but being motivated by his love. Putting his concerns and his mission above everything. Handing our lives over to him. But this isn’t a scary concept precisely because he is the shepherd king, the all loving king, the one who will look out for us and care for us always – even giving himself totally for us. The one who always wants the best for us.

But listen too to what Jesus goes on to say in this passage after he has said that he is the good shepherd – the true king. “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold”

The message here is that our vision of God and his people can be too small. The Jewish nation knew that they were God’s chosen people, but they failed to grasp that God had chosen them not because they were special, but because he had a special job for them to do. He always wanted them to be the ones who would demonstrate his love to the rest of the world, who would seek to tell others about him and encourage them to get to know him. But the people of Israel failed. Time and time again they got stuck with thinking they were special; time after time they failed to recognise God had a mission for them to proclaim him to the wider world.

Here Jesus is saying that part of him being the Good Shepherd, the true king is that we will see the truth that his kingship is over all. For the Jews listening to him this must have looked very challenging. We note in the Acts of the Apostles how hard this was for the early church as they began to realise that God was for all and not just for the Jews.

And it will be a challenge for us too as we begin to realise that even here in Shirley God's concern is for everyone. That he would love people from all over to come into our churches – St James, St John's and Christ the King – and come to recognise him as king and follow him. And I am sure that most of us would rejoice at that happening – but if and when it does happen we will also need to be ready to change to embrace new people and together to work at what being subjects to Jesus' kingship really means. Just as those first Jewish Christians had to change as Gentiles joined the churches. And that may well be quite hard for us.

And one more thought on the shepherd king. Right at the end of John's gospel we have the story of Jesus asking Peter three times if he loved him. We have probably always seen this as a kind of making amends for the three times that Peter denied Jesus. But each time Jesus asks, and each time Peter responds Jesus commands him "feel my lambs" or "feed my sheep". Jesus passes on to Peter some of that shepherd role. It reminds me of what the Bishop says at an induction service for a new vicar. "Receive the cure of souls which is both yours and mine". This caring, this loving, this shepherding is a task which we all share in. And it's a task which, as we have seen, extends wide into the community. We follow the example of the shepherd king as we live lives in his service.

I guess it might be quite easy to think of how we can shepherd those we know – and I think the church in Shirley has been great at that particularly through the pandemic. But it's much more challenging to think of what it might mean to shepherd those on the edges; those we meet occasionally, those who might be seen to be on our fringes or even beyond that. And it's that challenge that we as churches need to rise to if we are truly to accept him as our king.

So "I am the Good Shepherd" is far less about actual sheep and shepherds and far more about what it means for Jesus to be the true king, and for us to be people who accept him as King. People who submit our lives to him, knowing that what he asks us to do will always be in our own best interest. People who work with him in extending his kingdom to all. People who share in that shepherding task of caring for and showing God's love to all.