

Just imagine the scene: the Pandemic is over and you're at a dinner party (remember them?) and there's a lull in the conversation. The silence encourages a bright spark to ask you "what sort of animal best matches your personality?" Everyone turns to you to await your answer. They assume that you will pick something wise like an owl, or graceful like a racehorse or even something powerful like a tiger. But what you actually say is "a sheep".

There are guffaws and several rude remarks, and your partner starts looking attentively at their wristwatch!

Why would you want to be thought of as a sheep? O.K., lambs are quite cute, but aren't sheep dirty, smelly, and rather stupid, only suitable for winter jumpers and Sunday lunch!

Yet, Christians for hundreds of years have been happy to think of themselves as part of Jesus' flock. Why?

The simple truth is that the image of Jesus as our shepherd is incredibly powerful.

Paintings, poems, psalms, and hymns have powerfully ingrained this Gospel image into our faith.

Indeed, the idea of leaders shepherding people for God stretches right back over the Old Testament. Just think how many key figures were shepherds at some point in their lives: Moses, Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, David to name but a few.

Leaders, rulers, and Kings who failed to lead their people well were condemned as bad shepherds. Ezekiel writes, "Woe betide Israel's Shepherds who care only for themselves" Ezekiel 34: 2.

It's not surprising then that Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-18).

We should note that there are two New Testament Greek words for "good". The first is "agathos" which describes the moral quality of a thing. The second is "kalos" which means goodness that includes a sense of being beautiful. Kalos is the word that Jesus uses of himself. Now, the beautiful here does not refer to what Jesus looked like. It is about the sheer attractiveness of what the shepherd was doing.

Good/kalos means noble, ideal, or model. It's the characteristic we want for all Christian leaders.

What a great way to talk about our leaders, using a word coined by Jesus himself. It's a robust, rugged word, and it's about being prepared to genuinely care for the flock.

There's plenty of challenge in being a Christian leader/shepherd today. But there is also a challenge to all of us in this famous passage about our Good Shepherd. In John 10:16 Jesus says:

“I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd”.

Wow! Jesus has ‘other’ sheep, and he’s going to call them too. What does this mean? Who are these other sheep?

It could simply mean that Jesus is referring to the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles in his flock. An image of spiritual unity, drawn together by Jesus’ love.

However, some Bible scholars have suggested a rather mind-blowing alternative way of understanding this verse. In order to get a feel for this way of interpreting the passage let me share a Biblical story with you. It goes a little like this. Back in Exodus 17 Moses and the Israelites have left captivity in Egypt in search of the promised land, and it’s not going well. They have run out of water and are more than a little angry with Moses, who they claim has brought them out into the wilderness to die of thirst.

Moses turns to God, who instructs him to strike a rock with his staff in front of all the people. He does, and out of the rock comes water. Moses and his people go on, and we don’t hear about the rock again. Well, not until 1000 years later!

In a letter to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 10:1) Paul refers to this story about the rock and writes that the rock was Christ!

Jesus was the rock! How is that?

Jesus is not mentioned in the story, but Paul insists that Christ was present, providing the water, he was the rock.

This way of looking at this passage helps us to question where else has Christ been present, when else, with who else, how else. John begins his Gospel by claiming that through Jesus “all things are made”. And guess what? We don’t understand all that Jesus has done or doing.

Jesus is bigger than any claims of exclusive ownership by whatever church or denomination. The all-embracing, all saving love of Christ will not be controlled by narrow definitions.

Jesus leaves the door open for all of us to join his flock. He calls us by name. In every language and in every age.

In our moments of loneliness, isolation, alienation, and hopelessness the Good Shepherd responds to our deepest yearning. He brings us together, close to him, united in his love, He is calling now. Listen for your name. Join the flock. Be loved, be saved.

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