

The Good Shepherd is imagined by each of us in a different way.

The popular image of the shepherd for most urban and suburban people is shaped by television programmes – ‘One man and his dog’ or farming programmes. A stereotype of the shepherd would be a man in flat cap and waxed coat, wearing Wellington boots and carrying a large stick. His flock is gathered by collie dogs that respond obediently to each of his whistles.

The Good Shepherd for many church people may not conjure at all images of farmers; instead it may for them be a picture in a stained glass window of a church, a bearded man in a long white robe carrying around his shoulders a lamb he has rescued from danger; or it may be a picture of Jesus from a Sunday School book, a gentle figure with a white-woolled flock standing in lush pasture land beside which flows a gentle stream.

The flocks were not the fluffy white creatures of children’s picture books, they were rugged, wiry beasts, barely distinguishable from goats. The dangers they faced were numerous, a lack of food or water, attacks from wild animals, injury or death from falling in ravines, theft by those looking for a meal. The loss of sheep was so taken for granted that those hired to care for them would not have been unduly perturbed if their flock was reduced in number now and again. Jesus himself acknowledges that those paid to care for flocks often did so in a casual and uncaring way.

Rarely do the images we have in our minds capture the harshness or toughness of what it meant in Jesus’ time to be the Good Shepherd.

In Scripture, shepherds were tough and resilient. They had been trained from their youth to be tough in all circumstances, and in some cases they might have to lay down their lives for the sheep. So, a good shepherd is not only a guardian of the sheep, but almost like a bodyguard with eyes in the back of his head... ..knowing at every turn that the sheep’s enemies are hiding and ready to pounce. The Good Shepherd is scarred and weather worn. His clothes are dirty and ragged. He smells nasty. And he guarantees that the sheep will be safe no matter what. So, the life of a shepherd was anything but picturesque. It was dangerous and risky. Shepherds were also pretty rough characters around the edges. By this I mean that they spent their time out in the open fields rather than in “polite society.” So for Jesus to say, “I am the good shepherd” would have been kind of a “turn-off” to the religious elite and the well-educated snobbity snobs. A modern day equivalent might be for Jesus to say, “I am the good migrant worker.”

“I am the Good shepherd,” Jesus says. And most of us are familiar with this, and comfortable with it. But as we take a closer look, the portrait Jesus is painting of Himself is one in which our gentle, loving Saviour is also a Man of Steel Who will not allow any of the sheep to be trampled on or exploited in any way without having to run over Him first!!! Can we think of Jesus Christ this way? Can we think of our God as careful and loving, but tough in guarding His beloved at the same time? Jesus is, after-all, the One Who overturns the money changer’s tables, but also touches the

leper to bring about healing. Jesus is the One Who curses the fig tree, but will allow the weeping woman to anoint and kiss His feet as an act of devotion. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who is despised by some of the very people He came to save. Jesus is the Good Shepherd Who dies violently on the Cross and at the same time tells a hardened thief, “today you will be with me in paradise.” Five times, in John Chapter 10, Jesus talks about the Good Shepherd laying down His life for the sheep. And Jesus makes it very clear that the role of the Good Shepherd is not like the “hired hand” who is simply in it for the money and cares little or nothing for the sheep... ..and therefore will take off and leave the sheep at the least little hint of danger.

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd reminds us that God is especially concerned about those of us who are at risk, those who are vulnerable. Sheep are completely lost without the constant, vigilant care of their shepherd. In addition to unpacking, so to speak, Jesus’ image of the shepherd... ..let’s think about the sheep themselves. Some folks don’t feel too good about being thought of as dumb and mindless. To be called a sheep is not a very flattering thing. It is a term usually used when referring to a person who doesn’t think for themselves but just blindly follows everyone else. Sadly, this is often how people see Christians – as sheep. People who blindly follow a religion without thinking for themselves.

People who have been brainwashed to blindly accept teachings from a book written thousands of years ago that has no relevance today. I’m sure you’ve heard that reference before and maybe have even been called a sheep yourself for believing in God.

When you see sheep in a field you can understand why they have that image of blindly following. The shepherd just has to get one or two sheep going a certain way and the rest will follow. You’ll even see that if one sheep jumps an imaginary fence that the rest will also jump that fence which is not there. But is that the image of sheep that Jesus wants us to have of ourselves as he calls himself our Good Shepherd?

Is Jesus calling himself our Shepherd because he expects us to blindly follow him without any thought process? Not at all. That’s not the image that Jesus is wanting to portray by calling himself our Shepherd and we his sheep. The relationship of Shepherd and his sheep is one of trust. Jesus says, “[My sheep] listen to my voice...” And, “I know my own sheep and they know me...” You know, as the sheep of one flock—with Jesus as our Good Shepherd—we are given an image of God’s relationship with us. We are always in danger of enemies who are waiting to pounce, those who are working their way into the life of the flock to mistreat and kill the sheep. There will always be some who have come only to rob and hurt us.

Also, sometimes we go astray, just like sheep. If sheep are sick they sometimes will follow the voice of a stranger. Sheep wander off and fall into ditches. There are so many voices out there vying for our attention.

As we journey through life it is very easy to be led astray by false shepherds. We follow the pursuit of wealth. We follow our careers. We follow our possessions – believing these will bring us hope and security. What these do is that they can make us quite selfish – thinking of ourselves – just like the hired hand. In times of trouble, false shepherds are no help – they flee at first chance; Our careers, our money, our possessions – these are useless when we are confronting serious life and death issues.

There are so many distractions to lure us away from our life in Christ and Christ's Church. Jesus promises us that He will never let us go, but how often do we let go of Him? In verse 10, right before our Gospel reading for today Jesus says, "The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could have life to the fullest."

Being a sheep also means being a part of a community, a herd. Community is where we find support and security particularly during those times of concern and insecurity, which we all face. When Peter sank while walking on the water because of his concerns over the wind and the waves – Jesus took his hand and placed him back in the boat with the other disciples.

When the Good Shepherd found the lost sheep he carried him home – back to the flock of sheep. Sheep know that they need other sheep, desperately – because their very lives depend on it. That's why they follow the shepherd because they know that they are safe in his hands.

Likewise, God places us within communities of faith to strengthen our faith and also to use us to strengthen one another. As John said in our 2nd reading: We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us– and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

I have no problem being called a sheep. Just like I have no problem when people say that my Christian faith is a crutch. Even though it's intended as an insult that's exactly what my faith is. We use a crutch when we are hurt and need support. Your rod and your staff – they comfort me. We don't blindly follow a religion as Christians – we are in a relationship with Jesus, our Good Shepherd and to quote A W Tozer *"The only safe place for a sheep is by the side of his shepherd, because the devil does not fear sheep; he just fears the Shepherd."*

So let us not be ashamed to be called sheep in following Jesus for there is no other name by which we can be saved.