

In the Sermon on the Mount, we hear these words

Spoken by Jesus to his disciples, to us:

'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.' Matthew 7:15

We human beings are born, live, and die in communities,

And the fact is that for communities to cohere there must be leadership:

There must be people who speak with authority to us,

And who even have power, in certain circumstances, to use force against us

If we break the rules of our community.

The sad fact is also that some of those who exercise power in this world,

Can present themselves to us as being as harmless as sheep

But fact are like wolves who want to prey upon us

To use us to get money or prestige or some other good.

It's not only those who exercise political power who can act in this way,

But also those who exercise spiritual power.

And Jesus warns us, as his disciples, to be on our guard.

Again, he says, **'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.'**

The Good News that I'm proclaiming from the Gospel today

Is that Jesus gives us the model of what true leadership is,

And that we grow in our ability to discern true from false prophets

As we get to know Jesus:

Not simply what his teaching is, or what he has done.

But what he has done *for us*.

Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd who lay down his life *for you*,

And has taken up his life again in the resurrection *for you*.

Do you want to move from naivety to wisdom?

From cynicism to true hope?

Then listen to the Good News about the Good Shepherd

Who lay down his life for the sheep.

Let's listen to how our reading begins:

[Jesus said,] 'I am the good shepherd.'

Let's pause here.

The first thing to note is that Jesus is speaking *to the Pharisees*.

He is speaking to people
Who exercise a form of spiritual leadership in their community.
Now while Jesus could be very critical of the Pharisees,
They were not all 'bad guys': think of Nicodemus, for example.
We read about him in John's Gospel: he came to Jesus
Recognizing that Jesus came from God: this we read about in chapter 3.
At the end of the Gospel we again read about Nicodemus
Together with Joseph of Arimathea taking reverent care
Of Jesus' body in death.
Well it's to the Pharisees, to people who are leaders, that Jesus is speaking.

Jesus calls himself the *good* shepherd: but 'good' in what sense?
Well, it's not simply that he is morally good:
We could well understand the word 'good' here as 'noble' or 'beautiful'
Or even as 'model'.
In other words Jesus is not only the morally upright shepherd
But also the one who presents to us an attractive, a beautiful,
Model of what true leadership is.

Notice that I'm also suggesting that Jesus, in talking about himself as a shepherd
Is talking about himself as a *leader*.
Now it's a good start to picture Jesus as an actual shepherd.
Shepherds in Jesus' time would have been in the fields with the sheep,
They would have known them well, would literally have called them by name,
And they would have led the sheep out to pasture in the day
And back into the sheepfold at night.
That is indeed the basic picture,
And we even have it in our stained-glass window here at Bethlehem.
But in the Old Testament when shepherds are referred to
It is in relation to those in authority over God's people.
So if you read Ezekiel 34, or Jeremiah 23, or Zechariah 11,
You'll read about shepherds in this way: as leaders.
Commentators on this passage regularly, and in my opinion rightly,
Draw attention to this Old Testament background as the context
For Christian meditation on our reading.

But even if we don't have the Old Testament background clearly in mind,
The text itself makes clear for us what it means for Jesus to be
The good, the noble, the model shepherd,

The good, the noble, the model leader over us
This is what he says: **The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.**
This is where the nobility of Jesus is seen: in his willingness to lay down his life.

Here we are at the heart of the Christian faith
And we deal with a reality that is beyond human reason.

I've watched talks by the somewhat prominent atheist journalist and author
Christopher Hitchens, maybe you've heard of him, maybe not.
One of his most famous books is 'God is not Great',
And in my opinion his writing has a certain fiery and indignant charm.
One of Hitchens' reasons for thinking God is not great
Is all the unbearable suffering in this world.
To even hear or read described in dry prose the suffering that can take place
In the life of one little abused child is unbearable enough,
Let alone the sum total of human and even animal suffering.
For someone like Hitchens, if I have heard him correctly (and I think I have),
The evidence is that God is more like a hateful tyrant than a loving Father.

But what hateful tyrant would lay down his life for those under him?
Self-sacrifice is not the mark of tyranny, but of true leadership.
And this is who our Good Shepherd is:
He is one who lays down his life for the sheep; for us, for you.

Jesus goes on to make clear what his true leadership is
By contrasting it with mercenary leadership,
With power that is exercised for worldly gain.
This is what he says: **The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not
own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—
and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away
because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.**
The hired had is only in it for the money, so when danger comes
The prudent thing to do is to flee.

Remember, *Jesus is speaking to people who exercise some spiritual authority.*
He is raising a question for them: why are you doing this?
Much of Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees has to do
With their making a pretence of piety for worldly gain:
Making long public prayers ostensibly to God,

But actually to impress their hearers: 'I'm a godly person, you can trust me with your money'.

This attitude shows its true colours in the face of opposition: When false teaching comes in they do not stand their ground But flee and leave God's people to attacked and divided.

Jesus then goes on to give another example

Of how he is a Good Shepherd, a true and noble leader.

Listen to what he says: **I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,**

Now on the one hand we could say that this is about the personal connection That happens when true leadership is exercised.

To a tyrant the underlings are a faceless mass:

As Stalin is reputed to have said, 'The death of one man is a tragedy, Of a million, a statistic.'

A noble, beautiful, good leader knows individuals by name.

And they know the leader: there is a connection.

But something more is going on here:

For a start Jesus says this: **I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.**

There is something in our relationship with Jesus

That finds its basis in the relationship that Jesus has with the Father:

It's not just about knowledge of facts, in other words,

It's a living relationship that has it its heart trust.

Listen to what Jesus says: **I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. *And I lay down my life for the sheep.***

The great Lutheran theologian Philip Melanchthon said,

'To know Christ is to know his benefits':

To know Jesus and to be know by him

Is to live in the trust that he lay down his life for you,

And that he lives for you.

That in him you find the fullness of the grace of God.

In Jesus you have the full forgiveness of God,

You have the gift of life that not even death can destroy,

You have the Spirit of God who gives peace

That goes beyond human understanding,

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lay down his life for you:
This means that you are free really to know him, just as he knows you,
And calls you to follow him as he leads you.

The best way to recognise counterfeit money
Is to get to know what real money looks like and feels like.
The best way to recognise counterfeit leadership
In this world, and also in the church
Is to get to know real leadership, is to get to know the Good Shepherd, Jesus.

All human beings are weak, all will at times fail.
Even St Peter, in the trial of Jesus, denied three times knowing him.
But in the resurrection three times Jesus asked St Peter,
'Do you love me?'
And three times Jesus commanded St Peter, **'Feed my lambs, feed my sheep'**.
So let's live in humility as we hand on God's word
According to the vocations that God has given us.
Let's beware of wolves that come in sheep's clothing,
Including our own temptations to wolfishness,
And let's stand our ground in the places where God has put us.
Let's follow our Lord Jesus, the Great Good Shepherd,
Who lay down his life for the sheep.
And who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God,
Now and forever. Amen.