

- Jesus: *'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.'*
- This is quite a good week to talk about lost sheep.
- I have another nickname for Jesus which when I issue the second edition of John's Gospel, I will include.
  - Jesus, is not only the Good Shepherd, he is the Good Sheep Rustler.
  - A sheep rustler steals other sheep that are not his own.
  - *'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.'* But more of that later.
- There is something of a disconnect between a view of a typical shepherd whether we are talking about today driving a quadbike over muddy fields with a border collie at their side. Dirty flat cap, beaten up coat and the remains of a rollup between his taciturn lips. That's the shepherd not the collie.
- Or we might be thinking of a shepherd 2 000 years ago. Poverty stricken, coarse. At the bottom of the heap. Rough and ready. Quite possibly sleeping outside at night.
- On the other hand if you google Good Shepherd you will find something like this.



- Not only is Jesus in serious need of some clothes advice, he also looks as if he would be much more at home in a hair salon than a field. How would this Jesus cope with the sheep pellets on his gorgeous purple cloak? Or the rain on his beautifully brushed hair? Does he use Harmony hairspray?
  - Is this really the image he was intending to portray? What makes a Good shepherd in Jesus' view?
- Whatever the hallmarks one, I'm not sure that dress sense, coiffure, and an expression of anemic resigned impotence come into the equation.
  - But as I said earlier: more of this later. For it is the sheep I really want to concentrate on first.
- Because in almost all Good shepherd pictures, the anemic Good Shepherd has usually just rescued a small lamb rather than a full grown sheep. And it looks as if he has given them a wash and blow dry before seating them on his lap or around his shoulders. This is perhaps not surprising given the delicate fabric with which his gown is clearly made.
- Forgive my ignorance, I was born and brought up in North London, but I didn't think sheep were normally like that! I didn't think sheep liked being picked up very much. Are they not liable to kick and run away. And not many sheep of my acquaintance have beautifully washed clean wool. They tend to be big and greasy and covered in faeces. They get foot rot and hobble. They smell.

- There is something about just about every Good Shepherd picture I have ever seen that implies that the sheep are nice. The lost sheep was a bit foolish perhaps but completely acquiescent when the Good Shepherd rescues him and gently nestles in rather than kicks out frightened.
- And I don't think sheep are like that.
- And I don't think human beings are like that either.
- Sheep are really good at doing what they want or following the wrong people.
- Helen and I once spent a memorable afternoon in Australia unsuccessfully trying to guide what seemed like hundreds of sheep out of a field into a barn. We were with the farmer's children. We failed miserably. It took the eldest son to come whereupon they went into the barn in about 1 minute flat. Did they know his voice? Were we hired hands? I certainly felt like running away to vindictively eat a large lambchop.
- They are lots of bad shepherds, hired hands that human beings follow. Searching for fulfillment. For happiness. For Success. For influence. For self-gratification. For the ability not feel worried or anxious. For an easy stress free life.
  - Are all these hired hands? Will they disappear as soon as the going gets tough leaving you with nothing?
  - Are human beings good people who occasionally make mistakes, or are we so immersed in a fallen broken world that we are lost but don't know it? Do we smell of institutional corruption with the stain of unquestioningly living off third world slavery whilst we ring our horny hands and whimper that we can't do anything about it?
- Apparently, Jesus the Good shepherd says *'I know my own and my own know me'*. Well I do know him and I know he knows me. But I'm not always very good at following him. For nearly all of the above reasons.
- But when I do manage to follow him I don't see an effete, gorgeously robed intellectual. I see a human being who is busy stealing sheep, healing sheep, rescuing them from whatever ridiculous and painful places they have got themselves and forcibly encouraging them to listen to his voice when they have searching for another.
- I see him crying with those who cry and accepting those who think they are unacceptable. I see him using the awful events of life to offer a way out that leads to life rather than just the end. I see him in the Covid stricken hospital wards and the alcoholic in the gutter. In the slums of Venezuela and the refugee camps of Bangladesh. Stealing sheep. Offering life.
- And as far as I know, Peter's claim in our first reading is true, *'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.'*
- Jesus is off sheep rustling: *'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.'*
- What does this mean. Is it simply a historical statement saying that salvation is not just for the Jews, but for the Gentiles as well. That's why you and I are here today. I rather hope it means more than that, for that seems to restrict the victory of Jesus rather a lot.
- Does it not mean that there will only be one flock when Jesus has finished rustling? Does it not mean that Jesus' victory will encompass the whole of creation? Surely that was God's plan. God's hope when he sent his Son? And as we know, hope in God is the only sure hope there is. The only reliable option that will not run away when the wolf comes to the door.
- Why is it that Jesus is so sure that his Father loves him? That the Father loves the Son? *'For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.'*
  - God the Father loves his Son because of Jesus' obedience in following the command Jesus has given him.
  - God loves Jesus the Good Shepherd because he was prepared to lay down his life for the sheep. A plan from the beginning of time. Not something he did incidentally.
- The story of the cross is not one of what men and women did to Jesus but of what he did for us. Is this how Jesus rustles his sheep?
- What does this imply for us? Well I'm not really in the mood for a challenge today, but if you are then it might be to go and spread the news about the Good Shepherd.

- Personally I'm going to focus on the truth that I am a dirty sheep, self-obsessed and self-centred and Jesus has found me not because of anything I've done but because he loves me. He doesn't need me to be newly washed and fluffy white. He just needs to obediently be prepared to follow when I've strayed. Then he can heal my foot rot.
- And don't forget the final few words. *'For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 'to take it up again'* Maybe the only way to find resurrection, new hope, forgiveness and new beginnings is to admit that you need it!