

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus says,

¹¹I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The first thing we must notice here is that Jesus makes a claim about what kind of shepherd he is. He is a good shepherd. That is opposed to the other shepherds that he highlights, and there are two. Firstly, there are those who are only hired hands who have little care for the sheep, and they run away. Secondly, there are those that are thieves and robbers who come to steal and destroy, who are not shepherds at all, but instead climb in over the back of the sheep fold in order to destroy the sheep.

We should make the connection about who is the good shepherd, who are the hired hands or false shepherds and who the thieves. The thief and the robber are the evil one or any agent of the evil one. Those who want to destroy the church of God. These could be actors from within the church who claim to have the church's best interest at heart, but instead actually destroy the church. The hired hand also is one from within the church who says they have the sheep and the shepherd's best interest at heart, but instead do not protect the sheep as they should.

Jesus instead is the good shepherd. He does what a shepherd should do, and so we should talk about what a shepherd should do. Perhaps we have a perverted view of shepherds for two reasons. One, in modern farming we use fences, not shepherds and two, Jesus' depiction of a shepherd has changed our view of what a shepherd does. A shepherd is not meek and mild and gentle snuggling up with his sheep, although he may sleep near them. This is not the picture we should have of a shepherd. Shepherds are rugged and rough and strong. Their task is to protect the sheep. Remember the stories of David in the Old Testament. David is a shepherd. He protects the sheep by fighting off the wild animals, bears, wolves. That is what a shepherd does. He protects the sheep. When predators come, the shepherd fights, and the shepherd wins. When sheep go astray, the shepherd brings them back in line. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. The shepherd's discipline is comfort to the sheep. The shepherd is a protector of the sheep. He is fierce, he is not timid.

But the shepherd is not just a lowly nobody. The shepherd is also a king. What does David pray? The Lord is my shepherd. Here we must understand that Lord means king. The king is my shepherd. God is my shepherd. That is what David is praying. God is my shepherd. He is my king. We should not separate shepherd from king, especially not in these passages.

That is the purpose of a king, to protect the people. That is why we find in Ezekiel that the shepherds of Israel, that is the kings and others in leadership positions, are

condemned. For they are eating the sheep instead of protecting them. They are fleecing the flock instead of leading them. That is how the good shepherd and king should lead, by protecting the sheep.

To protect the sheep, a shepherd can't die. Here we encounter the first problem with this text. The reason why the first hearers reject what Jesus is saying, shepherds can't die. For when a shepherd is dead, he is no longer protecting the sheep. As we remember David, he fought the wild animals and he won. He didn't fight the wild animals and lay down his life, he fought them and won. That is why he is so bold to fight Goliath, because he expects God to be with him so that he wins. The good shepherd, though, lays down his life for the sheep. We will find further on in our passage, why he can lay his life down for the sheep.

¹²He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

It is obvious here that Jesus is condemning the religious leaders of the time, who have no concern for the life and faith of the people, but instead are only interested in holding their position of power. These words of condemnation have not changed. Many people have taken to leadership in the church and in our society with absolutely no interest in being under shepherds, or good shepherds, or following the good shepherd, but only have interest in serving themselves or their chosen agenda. Instead of protecting the sheep, as should be their duty, they run away and hide and let the wolf, the wild animal, destroy the sheep. If you consider the decline in the church over recent decades, Jesus' description of hired hands is perfectly apt, those who should be our shepherds have deserted the flock leaving the wolf to scatter the flock. This should be a message and warning for all leaders. Unless you are willing to follow the good shepherd in defending the flock, you are no shepherd, you are a wolf, a wolf in sheep's clothing.

But Jesus says,

¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

There are three points here.

Point one: The sheep of Jesus are known by Him. That is, He knows their name. He knows who they are. The sheep that belong to Jesus are the ones who have had His name placed on them. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, you are baptized. Each time we commence our divine service, we begin in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, as a reminder and proclamation of our baptism, and so that we know who is known by the shepherd.

The shepherd not only puts His name on us, He puts His mark on us, ‘receive the mark of the Holy Cross as a sign that Christ the crucified has redeemed you’. The shepherd even puts Himself in those who belong to Him. ‘This is my body, this is my blood’. The sheep smell of the shepherd, they look like the shepherd because he knows them.

Those who are forgiven belong to the shepherd, the good shepherd. Those who are at peace with God are those who are known by the good shepherd. Those who hear His words and believe them are the ones who are known by the good shepherd.

Point two: The sheep of Jesus also know Him. They hear His voice, and they listen. They follow Him. They have heard His call. And just as He says He will lay down His life for His sheep, His sheep are willing to lay down their life for one another. ‘Love one another as I have loved you. So you must love one another’. The sheep of the shepherd are both known by Him and know Him.

Point three: We learn something of the nature of God. The Father knows the Son, ‘just as the Father knows me and I know the Father’. Here we see the unity of God, which becomes the unity of the church. Being in Christ makes us one with Christ and with the Father and with the Holy Spirit and one with one another.

¹⁶And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

This is a condemnation of the Jewish people who refuse to listen, to accept Jesus as King, Shepherd, and so they refuse to hear His voice. The other sheep are the Gentiles who are soon, chronologically when Jesus was speaking, to hear the voice and believe. ‘He who has ears, let him hear’.

This should be a warning to us, to come and listen, to not be like the Jewish people who blocked their ears and said, we won't hear that you are a good shepherd. We do not want you to be our King. We do not want to acknowledge our sin. We want to hate our brother. This should be a warning to us, that we should listen to Him and not say, we don't like what you said here when you forced Paul to write this. We don't like what you said through Peter. We don't like that the Gospels sound different, but instead to hear His voice and say, yes Lord, we believe it. And when it is proclaimed, ‘this is the word of the Lord’, we say, ‘yes’, ‘thanks be to God’. And when it is proclaimed, ‘this is the Gospel of the Lord’, we say, ‘praise be to you, O Christ’.

We listen and we hear and we take it to heart and we believe. But it should also be encouragement for us, that we should be with the one flock, that is gathered together. For the church is simply the gathering of the believers where the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are rightly administered. That is the whole flock, so it should be encouragement for us to be in that flock, for Jesus only has one. One flock, that we

would all hear the same thing, that we would all believe the same thing, that there would be unity of doctrine and so unity with one another.

¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.

This is why the shepherd can die, because when he lays down his life for his sheep, he takes it up again. He does not leave the sheep unprotected and vulnerable. He returns to shepherd them.

Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

This pleases the Father, God the Father, because the sheep are protected. The Father can say to Jesus, 'well done, good and faithful servant', for he has succeeded in his mission. He has laid down his life and he has taken it back up again. He has done it to win the sheep for himself, to bring them all into one-fold. He has done it for you.

¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.

Well, dear good shepherd, mission accomplished. For the charge you have received from your Father, you have accomplished.

Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

What do we learn here of the nature of Jesus? That he is God. For no one has authority to take life other than the one who created it. And that is God and those to whom he has given this authority. Here we find out that Jesus is God, for he has authority to lay down his own life. No other human has authority to lay down his life in this manner, for self-killing is not authorized to humans. Although we think Jesus was brutally murdered, it is ever so clear he willingly sacrifices his life, but only because he can take it up again. And he has that authority to do so.

We do not have that authority to lay down our life, as in to take our own life. We do have authority though, to follow Christ into his death, as we have already followed him into his death in our baptism. Because if you have been united with Christ in a death like his, you will certainly be united in a resurrection like his. Therefore, because Christ is risen, we also are risen to new life.

While we can't kill ourselves, we can make the same sacrifice that Jesus does. And those of us who are called to be shepherds, that is pastors and other leaders in the church, can lay down their life for the sheep. And the sheep also can lay down their life for one another, 'love one another, as I have loved you'. This is the authority that Jesus

has given to us, that we lay down our life for one another. Not that we protect our life at all costs, because my life is more important than another's. And not that we live our life as if we are so important that I'm willing to take my neighbour's life, but that we would love our neighbour, as God has loved us.

John tells us in his letter, that we should abide with Christ. And the way we abide with Christ is this.

'This is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God and God in him. By this we know that he abides in us by the spirit whom he has given us'. (1 John 3:23-24 ESV)

God has given us his Holy Spirit in our baptism. God gives us his Holy Spirit whenever his word is read, proclaimed, preached and heard. God gives us his Holy Spirit when his forgiveness is proclaimed. 'In Jesus' name your sins are forgiven'. God gives us his Holy Spirit. He spreads it lavishly on us each time we receive the body and blood of Christ. We are anointed and sent forth, abiding in Christ as he is most definitely in us.

Little children, dear children, listen to your shepherd. Hear his voice. Abide in him.

Let him be the shepherd that he promised to be for God knows we desperately need his protection. Amen.

The pace of God that surpasses all our understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.