

Shepherds and the Good Shepherd (4) The Prophets



As shepherds played such an important part in Israel's history from the very beginning, it is not surprising that we find many references to sheep and shepherds in the words of the Old Testament prophets. Several of them speak of the kings of Israel and Judah who have been bad shepherds to their people.

One notable chapter is Ezekiel 34, where God declares, "My shepherds did not try to find the sheep. They were taking care of themselves and not the sheep. So listen to me, you shepherds. I, the Sovereign LORD, declare that I am your enemy. I will take my sheep away from you and never again let you be their shepherds; never again will I let you take care only of yourselves." These prophecies were fulfilled when Israel and Judah were conquered and many of their people taken into captivity.

The prophecy continues, "I, the Sovereign LORD, tell you that I myself will look for my sheep and take care of them in the same way that a shepherd takes care of his sheep that were scattered and brought together again... I will look for those that are lost, bring back those that wander off, bandage those that are hurt, and heal those that are sick; but those that are fat and strong I will destroy, because I am a shepherd who does what is right." So not only the bad shepherds are condemned, but also bad sheep! These are not kings, but other people who do nothing to help their needy fellow men and women, and who prosper at their expense.

The image of God Himself coming as a shepherd to the sheep, gathering them together and tending those that are weak, also appears in the book of the Prophet Isaiah. The Good News Bible translates beautifully Isaiah 40, verses 10 and 11: “The Sovereign LORD is coming to rule with power, bringing with Him the people He has rescued. He will take care of His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs together and carry them in His arms; He will gently lead their mothers.”

Isaiah’s words are often read in church services during Advent. This is because Christians believe they have been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, the Good Shepherd and Saviour of the world.

A prayer:

Awaken us, O God, to that faith which dies unless it clothes the naked, feeds the hungry, comforts the sorrowing, shelters the destitute and binds up the broken; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

(Menno Simons, 1496-1561, quoted in the Methodist Prayer Handbook, 2020-2021)

- Rev John Barnett

Image: shepherd carrying a sheep; free photo from pixabay.com.