

Shepherds and the Good Shepherd (6) Hearing His voice



Traditional shepherding in the Holy Land and surrounding countries is very different from the practice of shepherding in the UK. One obvious difference is that the Middle Eastern shepherd leads his sheep, whereas shepherds in this country drive them, often aided by a dog or two.

Even here, though, it is possible to observe the way sheep will recognise and follow the voice of the person who cares for them. In any sizeable flock at lambing time there will be lambs needing human care; orphans, weak and injured ones, those whose mothers do not have enough milk. Hand reared lambs soon learn who it is that regularly brings them their bottle and will come running at the sound of their voice. Like Mary's little lamb in the nursery rhyme, they will follow that person everywhere.

In the Gospel according to St John, chapter 10, we read how Jesus described Himself as The Good Shepherd. In so doing, He was contrasting Himself with the kings in the Old Testament whom the prophets condemned as bad shepherds, only interested in themselves and with no concern for the welfare of their subjects. What was more, He was declaring Himself to be the fulfilment of the prophecies that God Himself would come to take care of His people, the sheep of His pasture.

The Good Shepherd, said Jesus, lays down His life for the sheep. That is the reason He came into our world, born in Bethlehem so that He might die on Calvary. "I have come," He said, "in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness." He came to die our death so that we might live His life.

"My sheep," He declared, "listen to my voice; I know them and they know me. I give them eternal life. And they shall never die." May we hear and recognise His voice, and follow where He leads us, trusting in His promises and His unfailing love.

A prayer:

Loving Shepherd of thy sheep,
Keep thy lamb in safety, keep.
Nothing can thy power withstand,
None can pluck me from thy hand.

Loving Saviour, thou didst give
Thine own self that we might live;
And the hands outstretched to bless
Bear the cruel nails' impress.

I would praise thee every day,
Gladly all thy will obey;
Like thy blessed ones above,
Happy in thy perfect love.

Loving Shepherd, ever near,
Teach thy lamb thy voice to hear.
Suffer not my steps to stray
From the straight and narrow way.

Where thou leadest I would go,
Walking in thy steps below;
Till before my Father's throne
I shall know as I am known. AMEN

(Jane Elizabeth Leeson, 1807 – 1882)

- Rev John Barnett

Image: Shepherd in Jordan (photo: Pete Wildman)