

Sheep Dogs and Shepherds

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. Jn 10:14~ Jesus

It was quite a common site in Jesus’ day to see flocks of sheep, and the shepherds taking care of them. Shepherds were and are quite a breed. Rough, tough, 24 hours on the job, strong and wary to protect them from danger, and yet gentle enough to talk to them and comfort them with the sound of his voice.

We are, if we know Jesus, sheep of his pasture, who know him and follow his leading. Maybe that term is not quite so common in today’s world, but it is still an image which can give Christians encouragement and faith.

We are anything but perfect. Like sheep, we go astray. We think sometimes only about what we might eat. We keep our heads down and don’t make waves. We could graze right over a cliff, if it were not for Jesus our Shepherd.

St. Jerome, a religious scholar who lived in Rome and in Bethlehem in the late 4th Century, wrote about this. “I am,” he says, “like the sick sheep that strays from the rest of the flock. Unless the Good Shepherd takes me on His shoulders and carries me back to His fold, my steps will falter, and in the very effort of rising, my feet will give way.”

There are many places sheep go. The key for growing faith is to have a balance of focus on earthly and heavenly things. When we get so unbalanced that we only think about faith, or that we never think of faith, we must seek the balance that God wants to restore to us. “Keep your eyes on the stars, and your feet on the ground,” says former president Theodore Roosevelt. Jesus says is this way. “Seek first the kingdom, and all its righteousness, and all these (earthly blessings) will be added unto you.”

One of the wonderful things about being one of Jesus’s sheep is that we know his voice. He speaks to us and we listen. This familiarity in daily matters will make sure that we hear his voice when things may turn difficult. Jesus “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.”~ Jn 10:4

In Palestine today, often flocks of Bedouin shepherds will end up at the same watering hole around dusk, so that they get all mixed up together—eight or nine small flocks turning into a convention of thirsty sheep. Their shepherds do not worry about the mix-up, however. When it is time to go home, each one issues his or her own distinctive call—a special trill or whistle and that shepherd’s sheep withdraw from the crowd to follow their shepherd home. They know whom they belong to; they know their shepherd’s voice, and it is the only one they will follow.

So we must listen for the voice of our shepherd Jesus, as he speaks in today's world. We must remember that Jesus is the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, and that we can be shepherds from time to time, only if we leave our own agendas behind. We can hear at any time, but one of the places God can speak clearly, and we are in a listening mood, is in worship.

One Sunday, a young pastor decided to use the 23rd Psalm for his children's sermon. He began to tell the children about sheep—that they aren't smart and need lots of guidance and that a shepherd's job is to stay close to the sheep, protect them from wild animals and keep them from wandering away.

He pointed to the little children in the room and said they were the sheep and needed lots of guidance. Then the pastor put his hands out to the side, palms up in a dramatic gesture, and with raised eyebrows said to the children, "If you are the sheep, then who is the shepherd?" He was pretty obviously indicating himself.

A few seconds of silence followed, then one little boy said, "Jesus is the shepherd." The young pastor, obviously caught by surprise, said to the boy, "Well, then, who am I?" The boy thought for a moment and then said with a shrug, "I guess you must be a sheep dog."

So, what are we? Are we the sheep who hasn't learned a thing? Are we sheep who knows his master's voice? Are we a shepherd who knows the ultimate Shepherd and hear his voice?

Or maybe, just maybe, we are a sheepdog trying to become a shepherd, or at least to aid Jesus in his shepherding duties.

So, sheep, shepherds, sheepdogs, or somewhere in between, listen for Jesus the Great Shepherd's voice. He is indeed the only one who knows both the dangers and the final destination.