

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Restoration after Exile

23 Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. ² Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. ³ Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴ I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

The Righteous Branch of David

⁵ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Mark 6:30-34,53-end

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴ As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

Healing the Sick in Gennesaret

⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴ When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵ and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

I was visiting Turkey, which has remarkably similar geography to Palestine, and a similar rural economy, such as would have been found in Jesus' day.

We were walking back from the ruins on the hill on which the city of Laodicea once stood, which had had a thriving Christian Church

Up the gentle valley came a very large flock, hundreds of sheep and goats, many with bells around their necks, led by a shepherd on a donkey and alongside the outside of the flock dogs and women to usher them along as they were following the master. An unforgettable experience.

They were under control, being led to new pasture, or water, and would have had I should think been taken to a safe place for the night. A good shepherd.

But shepherds throughout history, have not always been so careful of their sheep, as with every job, profession there are good and bad leaders.

The powerful image of the shepherd as a leader of the people is very prevalent in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. Remember in those days the shepherd led the sheep, he did not drive them before him, as we are more familiar with in Britain.

So Jeremiah among others, likens the people of Israel to God's flock and he see the shepherds the leaders of the people, religious leaders who were losing, scattering the flock, even driven them away from God.

People who had been given responsibility for the welfare, safety of Gods people, had destroyed and scattered them, not attended to them.

And God was not at all pleased with them "Woe to you shepherds".

Now people are not quite like sheep. Physical and political leadership is difficult enough, but spiritual leadership-which cannot be seen so easily, is even trickier.

Jesus had quite a lot to say about those who should have been shepherding the people, that is leading the people towards God in his day.

He calls them in one place ravening wolves: he calls them blind guides. Over and again they demanded unrealistic rules about ritual conduct, yet when someone comes along teaching God's freedom, love and healing they don't like it. (Lets also add not all leaders were like this, some listened, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea for example).

In our passage today, Jesus sees God's people scrambling about seeking teaching, healing from God that he can bring. He sees them with compassion "they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus tells us **he is** "The good shepherd", The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" he protects them, the leads them to find pasture, he comes to give them life. Not only that he shows he has taken God's role too. "I am the good shepherd". **I am** the title God gave himself to Moses.

When the early church came to think about how the new congregations should be shepherded in practical terms, we have clues from the letters Paul wrote both to emerging churches, and to Timothy, one of his young leaders.

Leaders in the NT church are variously called deacons, overseers elders. As Paul was leaving the region about Ephesus, he calls the leaders of the churches together and says to them "keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he has bought with his own blood".

In his letter Peter writes

“Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it - not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.

In Paul’s first letter to Timothy, he gives more detailed instructions to his young protégé. Only having one wife and not getting drunk, are the least of what we would expect of our leaders! Read the short letter sometime soon.

Throughout Church history there have been those who have been faithful shepherds after the way of the Good Shepherd and those who have been negligent or abused their position.

I pray none of you have come across, those in any position of authority, clergy or lay, that have been like that.

But we need to keep praying for those with any authority in the church, local and national, and worldwide, that they keep the model of the Good Shepherd always in their sights, guiding teaching leading God’s people towards God. I pray that is true for this church. Amen

Go before us, Lord Christ
With the blessing of your goodness
and guide the ways of all those you call to authority
In the way of your justice,
The knowledge of your liberty
And the wisdom of your gentleness
For your name’s sake.

[Janet Lawrence]