

Pastor Roy Summers

7<sup>th</sup> February 2021

### Introduction—Similarities to WW2

I've been reading about the experiences of ordinary people during the second world war in order to get an idea of how people felt in an era similar to the one we are passing through. Of course there were differences, our enemy is invisible, theirs was visible. But there were many similarities too, especially at the start of the war: people stayed in their homes, for fear of attack from the air; places like theatres closed; there were mass mobilisation programs to get everyone, not a vaccine, but a gas masks. And many other similarities.

The one that struck me was the way people looked to their leaders in that crisis, and especially to Winston Churchill; just as we have been looking to Boris Johnson and to medical leaders such as Professor Witty. (Although, thankfully, we have yet to hear words like this: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat!!")

Of course, it is not just in times of trouble that we look to leaders: we are always looking to others for a lead, because human beings are born followers: It might be a celebrity figure, a musician, a rapper, actor, sports personality, fashion icon, YouTuber, figure of history, or it could even have been a Captain Tom! Wherever we go around the world, we find that people are wired to be followers. And that's what today's talk is about, it's about following, it's about who's leading us, and it's an invitation to follow Jesus Christ. Because on Sunday mornings, we're making our way through the seven occasions when Jesus made remarkable "I am" statements about himself, "I am the bread of life", "I am the light of the world," "I am the gate for the sheep" and today "I am the Good Shepherd."

And "Good Shepherd" simply means "Good Leader," because in Israel those days leaders were called shepherds, and the ordinary people were called sheep. So when Jesus makes today's claim: "I am the Good Shepherd" we must hear, in today's language, "I am the Good leader, the excellent leader, the best leader." And since Jesus calls himself the Good Leader, he is, by implication, inviting us to follow him.

### Backgrounds

To help us understand this wonderful claim more fully, we need two little pieces of background.

The first is this: local shepherds would club together to build and manage one village sheep pen. It had a high wall all around to keep thieves and wolves out and a single door in the circular enclosure.

In the evening, each shepherd would bring his sheep through the gate where they would be safe overnight. Each morning the shepherd would come to the pen; the doorkeeper would recognise him and let him in, he would call out to his sheep who were mixed with all the other flocks, but only his own sheep would recognise his voice and follow him out of the sheep pen into green pastures for the day.

This bit of knowledge will help us understand Jesus' words better, and so too will the false leaders of Jesus' day.

Did you pick up the menacing undertone of "danger" in our reading today? "The man who does not enter the sheep by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber" (v.1) and, v. 10, "the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." While Jesus is the Good Shepherd, there are false shepherds ready to jump over the walls, steal the sheep, lead them astray and kill them.

Example of false shepherds. In the previous chapter John records a sad example of these fake shepherds. Jesus had just healed a blind man, but instead of rejoicing with the man, these wolves insulted him, rubbished the Jesus who had healed him, and then kicked the man out of the synagogue. What did Jesus, the Good Shepherd do? He searched for the man, found him and became his true leader, his Good Shepherd. So when Jesus says "I am the Good Shepherd" he is at the very same time also warning us about BAD Shepherds and urging us to be on our guard.

Well, with that background in mind, this great claim, "I am the Good Shepherd" demands of all hearers, that we ask three questions of ourselves:

1. Am I one of Jesus' true sheep?
2. Do I listen to the words of Jesus' undershepherds? And looking to 2021 and beyond,
3. Will I trust the Good Shepherd for the future?

May I encourage each hearer to ask each one of themselves.

### Question 1:

#### Am I one of Jesus' true Sheep?

Am I a true Christian? Am I a genuine believer? Am I a bonafide follower of Jesus Christ?" It's a vital question to ask because Jesus once said that on the last day, some people will be in for a shock: "not everyone who says "Lord Lord" (on the last day that is) will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21). Just as there are false shepherds there are fake sheep.

You ask, How can I know I am a true sheep? Let me give you some tests:

*(1) A true sheep believes that Jesus is the Son of God. The blind man of chapter 9 became a true sheep of Jesus when he acknowledged Jesus was God. Verse 37 reads like this: "Lord I believe" and he worshipped him." By calling Jesus "Lord" and by worshipping him, the blind-*

man-made-whole is saying to Jesus “I believe you are God.” This is the first mark of every true sheep: they believe that Jesus Christ is more than a good man or a great teacher, they believe he is God come in human flesh. Do you believe Jesus is God? “The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me” Jesus said in verse 25 – “my miracles are ample proof of my divinity.” Here’s another test:

*(2) A true sheep hears the voice of Jesus.* When the true shepherd goes into the pen and calls out, his own sheep twitch their ears and raise their heads!

Many years ago I was driving with my family through sheep country somewhere in the Yorkshire Dales (everywhere is sheep country, in the beautiful Yorkshire Dales!) I stopped the car at a place where there were sheep on the hills to the right and left, wound down the window and called to them, I forget what I said, “Sheepies” or what! And to my surprise—and then to my shock - they came down from the hills, surrounded our green Vauxhall Astra, blocked the whole road—so embarrassing—never do that! My voice must have sounded exactly like the voice of their shepherd, because sheep recognise and take note of the voice of their shepherd! (BTW: they drifted back to the hills, if you were wondering!)

So it is with the true sheep of Jesus. When true believers read the Bible or hear God’s Word preached, they hear Jesus speak to them. It’s a test of being a true sheep, “My sheep listen to my voice” Jesus says.

A Christian man once described the moment he became a true Christian, a true sheep. He had grown up in the church, he had heard a 1000 sermons, but he didn’t really “get them” until, all of a sudden one day the sermons began to make sense! Same preachers!! What had happened? This is what he writes: “I had become a sheep, and I knew the Shepherd’s voice.”

*(3) A true sheep follows the Shepherd.* Remember the daily routine? Shepherd comes to the gate, true sheep recognise his voice, and then true sheep follow him out to green pastures for the day. “My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me.” (verse 27)

To follow Jesus means to heed his words, to obey his loving commands, to surrender our wills to his sovereign will. Of course we will stumble along the way. We do not follow as we would like to, but every true sheep can say, “it’s my heart’s true desire to follow Jesus.”

So may I ask you, are you one of Jesus’ true sheep? If you are, thank God for his work of grace in your heart, and if you are not, then he invites you to begin following him today. Only this leader (i) can give you forgiveness of sins and freedom from guilt, “I lay down my life for my sheep” (v.15) –Jesus is talking about his death through which all our sins can be forgiven. Only this leader (ii) can give us hope beyond the grave, “I give them eternal life and they shall never perish” (verse 28). Jesus, the Good Leader, invites you to begin following him today – all other leaders will let you down some day, some way. Ask God to open your eyes so that you can believe that Jesus is the Son of God, hear his loving voice and obey him.

Our second and third questions are much briefer. The second is this:

## Question 2: Do I listen to the words of Jesus' Undershepherds?

Someone may ask, you see, "how do I hear the voice of the Good Shepherd today? Jesus is in heaven how do I hear his voice? The blind man could listen to the voice of Jesus in person, but how can I listen to the words of the Good Shepherd today?" Well, we hear the voice of Jesus through God's Word, the Bible, that's the first way. And the second way is this: the Good Shepherd has appointed undershepherds, called pastors or elders, to represent him in this world, to love and care for the sheep, to feed the flock with God's Word, to guard the sheep from wolves and to lead the flock. Pastors and elders are, if you like, the hands and feet of the Good Shepherd in this world.

What an awesome responsibility for them! Pray for your church leaders! And what a privilege for the sheep – to have a group of undershepherds watching over their souls!

After Paul planted a church, we find that he was nervous until leaders were appointed to look after them. Because Paul knew that the Good Shepherd now in heaven, cares for his sheep through undershepherds.

Have you put yourself knowingly and willingly into the care of your local church elders? Did you know there is no such thing in the New Testament as a Christian who is all on their own, who has no flock of other sheep around them or local undershepherds watching over them.

Do you listen to the words of the undershepherds whom Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, by his Holy Spirit - Acts 20 - has appointed? In these days when we can so easily drift away from one another, it's even more important to tune in to our leaders. "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They watch over you as men who must give an account" (Hebrews 13:17).

## Question 3 — Will I trust the Good Shepherd for the future?

I've been asking people this week to give me one-word descriptions of how they or their colleagues or their friends or neighbours have been feeling in Lockdown Three, "Weary, muted, mundane, monotonous, like Groundhog Day- every day is the same, uncertain, in limbo, helpless, powerless, low." I think many of us recognise some of those feelings! So I ask, will we trust our Good Shepherd for the uncertain and strange year that lies ahead of us, and beyond? Will we believe all the wonderful promises he has made to us:

My sheep will "go in and out (of the gate) and find pasture" (verse 9)

"I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (verse 10)

"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand." (27-28)

Whatever fears or doubts you and I may have about the year ahead, however low we may feel about the future, let's hang on to the promises of the Good Shepherd, who knows us, who came to give us life to the full here and now, who will give us eternal life beyond the grave, and who says that we are totally safe in the hands of his Father in heaven.