

A Subtle Warning

This Sunday is commonly referred to as "Good Shepherd Sunday" in the church year. Every year, the theme of the readings deals with Jesus being the Good Shepherd: the Gospel reading is a portion of the 10th chapter of John and Psalm is the 23rd Psalm. The main theme on which we typically focus is the theme that Jesus fits the Good Shepherd image presented in this Psalm. While today's Gospel reading, the first part of the "Good Shepherd Chapter" in John's Gospel account does not directly invoke that image, the image is there. Besides looking at this image of Jesus being the Good Shepherd, I would like to take a look at the subtle warning that Jesus gives us in this reading.

While Jesus does not directly say that He is the Good Shepherd in these verses, the hint of it is there when He says that He is the gate for the sheep. In those days, when the sheep were brought into the pen for the evening, the shepherds would keep watch at the gate, guarding it and the sheep, sleeping across the gate so that no one could just walk in. So, in effect, they actually are a part of the gate. The shepherd takes that role of being the gate and determining who gets in and who gets out. The caution here is that it is too easy to then make Jesus a sort of egotistical gatekeeper. When we look at the whole of Jesus' ministry, we see that is not the case - this gatekeeper will let in anyone who comes to Him, comes to the gate, believing that Jesus is the key to getting in. When we look at the Jesus that we find in the Gospel accounts, we see someone who is a servant, as someone who cares for others before Himself, as someone who points to God, giving God the 'credit' for all that He does.

The other thing we need to remember to do is to keep the text which we are looking at within the wider context in which we find the text. Unfortunately,

because the chapter and verse numbering were added 1200 and 1500 years, respectively after the Gospels were written, it is sometimes too easy to neglect the wider context. Today's reading follows an antagonistic exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees after Jesus healed a blind man and the talk turned to spiritual blindness. By switching to this analogy of shepherds, Jesus is telling the people that the Pharisees, despite their good intentions, had led the people astray, away from where God wanted the people to be. Jesus uses the images from the 23rd Psalm to say that those apply to Him and as such, is God. The connection between God and himself is such that access to God is granted by the gatekeeper, by Jesus. As mentioned earlier, this access is not an exclusive egoism where Jesus decides who is worthy to enter through the gate.

This then leads us to the subtle warning that Jesus gives to us. It is easy to miss, especially when we focus on Jesus being the gate and the implications of that along with the imagery that the 23rd Psalm evokes for us. This warning is about those who try to enter the 'sheepfold' by a way other than going through Jesus. Their intentions are not to become a member of the flock, but rather to steal from the flock. Jesus is not talking about modern church 'sheep stealing' of getting members of one church to join another church. Jesus is talking about distracting people away from the will of God. Later in this same passage Jesus says that those who came before Him as being bandits and thieves. Here, Jesus is referring to the false prophets who actually led the people astray and not towards God. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus talks of being wary of false prophets who come in His name, claiming to be like Jesus, but in reality, are just trying to get the people to follow them and not Jesus. In these verses, Jesus talks of these false prophets going after the chosen, the believers.

In his book "The Screwtape Letters," C.S. Lewis writes from the perspective of Screwtape, one of Satan's tempters. Screwtape is giving instructions to his nephew, Wormwood, on how to tempt someone, only referred to as the Patient in the book, to turn away from Jesus and towards Satan through a series of letters. In one of the letters, Screwtape explains to Wormwood the different perspectives that God and the devils have for the human race. Screwtape writes, "We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons." One of the ways to lure people away from God is to promote passivity and irresponsibility in the Patient: "(God) wants men to be concerned with what they do; our business is to keep them thinking about what will happen to them."

This is what Jesus meant by thieves and bandits - as someone who is looking to take from the flock and not to try to join the flock by another way. There is only one way into the flock and that is through Jesus as Jesus asserts later in John's Gospel account. Perhaps this is one of the passages that C.S. Lewis had in mind when he wrote "The Screwtape Letters." Perhaps he was thinking how a thief and bandit would go about stealing from the flock and in the quote mentioned earlier, the purpose for stealing from the flock. The point that Lewis was making is that the false prophets do not tempt us with grand schemes and grand ideas, but slowly, where we are led into complacency and inaction, feeling that we do not have to do anything once we are in the flock. The book shows that we are tempted, not by overt, open ways as our faith grows and deepens, but by subtle ways, covert ways in which we are led down a path that leads away from God. Hopefully, according to Satan, to the thieves and bandits, that path will get us so far from God that there would be no way back and the person has no choice but to follow that thief. However, as the death and resurrection of Jesus shows, as well as other Old

Testament readings such as Jonah and several of the Psalms, there is no place in which we can go that is out of God's reach, not even past the gates of Hell.

While at first reading of this Gospel text and a mindset of Jesus as the gentle, Good Shepherd we hear a message of safety and protection by Jesus, there is also a stern warning to those who try to steal from the flock. Those who are thieves and bandits, those who are false prophets who try to get things for their own selfish goals, will be dealt with harshly, as thieves were dealt with in Jesus' day. In this, we find the Good News that Jesus is our Good Shepherd and that Jesus will protect us.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/JYHxRo9Sh8c>

Service: <https://youtu.be/IFL7XeAnHHE>