

**One Shepherd (John 10. 11-21)**

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‘It is difficult to think of any subject which has been more used and abused than ecclesiastical language about sheep and shepherds – to such an extent that the very language of the Good Shepherd seems coated in kitsch’.<sup>1</sup> These are the words of theologian James Alison. Although – as he goes on to say – he himself is ‘deeply committed to this language of sheep and shepherd’. He received his own sense of being called to ministry by means of Jesus’ words to Peter, ‘Feed my sheep’. And those of you who heard Susanna preach a couple of weeks ago, will know that these same words have spoken deeply to her, drawing her (as with Peter, as with James Alison) from a sense of hopelessness and unworthiness into purpose and service. There’s depth to this imagery, an enduring power! So, drawing on a brilliant discussion by James Alison, I’d like to us to explore it a little more.

Alison points out that in the Hebrew Scriptures the notions of ‘Shepherd’ and of ‘Temple’ are dynamically related. Shepherding is what emerges when the Temple collapses; and, says Alison, ‘Judaism and Christianity are both religions of the collapsing Temple’.<sup>2</sup> Now that’s a bit dense, so let’s take a step or two back!

Alison tells us that, as a matter of historical fact, the evolution of Judaism is tied in important respects to the collapse of the Temple in Jerusalem. It was the destruction of the Temple in 587 BC which led to the creation of text-based Judaism, and it was the destruction of the second Temple in AD 70 which led to the creation of rabbinic Judaism. But in each case, for the prophetic tradition, ‘the collapse was seen not merely as a fact of history but actually as part of the way in which God tries to get through, as part of God’s plan to get us beyond something unworthy of us’.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Alison, ‘The Importance of Being Indifferent’ in *On Being Liked* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003), pp.114-115.

<sup>2</sup> Alison, ‘The Importance of Being Indifferent’, p.118.

<sup>3</sup> Alison, ‘The Importance of Being Indifferent’, p.118.

Thus, in the gospels, when Jesus is remembered as having taught about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, his hearers understand that he's not just predicting the likely behaviour of the Roman occupiers. He is prophesying the imminent action *of* God to make possible some new and different access *to* God. 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down' (Mark 13.2).

A key text in this vision is the book of the prophet Ezekiel. In chapter 33 of Ezekiel, a refugee comes from Jerusalem to the group of Hebrew exiles then in Babylonia in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. The fugitive 'announces the fall of the city', which necessarily involves the destruction of the Temple. 'This is not news to Ezekiel, who had already seen God in a vision detaching himself from the Temple and becoming flexible and mobile'.<sup>4</sup> But after hearing it announced, Ezekiel is told by God to prophecy against the priests, the so-called shepherds of Israel who have been using their cultic position not to serve the people but to exploit them: 'Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them' (Ezekiel 33. 2-4).

Alison writes: 'please notice ... the prophecy is not that because these shepherds have failed to feed the sheep, the Temple is going to be destroyed'. That's already happened: 'no, this bit of the prophecy is simply the preamble to the real prophecy'. For now Ezekiel begins to speak of 'a quite new sort of shepherding' coming into being, 'one instigated by God himself' in the wake of the collapse of the Temple.<sup>5</sup> Speaking for God, the prophet continues: 'Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of

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<sup>4</sup> Alison, 'The Importance of Being Indifferent', p.118.

<sup>5</sup> Alison, 'The Importance of Being Indifferent', p.119.

his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep ... And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land ... I will feed them with good pasture ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice' (Ezekiel 34. 11-16).

And Alison's point is that, for Ezekiel, it's the collapse of the Temple which leads to the vision of God's own self coming to 'dwell in the midst of God's people'. Thus, 'the notion of "Shepherd" is always to be understood not just as a nice image among other nice images, but as one that only makes sense *in critical juxtaposition to the notion of "Temple"*'.<sup>6</sup>

So – with this in mind, it seems to me that a bunch of new connections are discernible in the passage we heard read. In John's gospel, Jesus' first public action is to change water into wine at the wedding at Cana, thus signifying that in him the true bridegroom of Israel has come. He's announcing himself as the Messiah, the fulfiller of God's purposes. Immediately after this, he goes to Jerusalem for the Passover, where he drives the traders and money-changers out of the Temple. When he's asked on what authority he is doing such a thing, he replies, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up'. There's some muttering about the physical impossibility of his claim: 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' 'But', says John, 'he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this' (John 2. 13-22).

In other words, from the very beginning John's gospel associates Jesus with the collapse of the Jerusalem temple and the arrival of a quite new access to God. This is made explicit when John's Jesus draws on Ezekiel's prophecy to identify himself as the now immediate presence of the shepherding God who is free to be

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<sup>6</sup> Alison, 'The Importance of Being Indifferent', p.120.

with and for people quite independently of temple and cult. 'I am the Good Shepherd' (John 10.11). 'I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out'.

But then the question arises, who exactly are 'my sheep'? In Ezekiel, the emphasis seems to be on the lost sheep of Israel – those who have been scattered in exile, oppressed and neglected by the powerful in the land. But Jesus seems to extend the metaphor: 'I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd' (John 10.16) – one new humanity. This implied universality of Jesus' shepherding fits with his conversation, earlier in the gospel, with the Samaritan woman – a conversation also linked to the notion of the collapsing temple. This woman had commented to Jesus that 'Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but [the Jews] say that the place people must worship is in Jerusalem'. He had said to her: 'Woman, believe me, the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... the hour is coming and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him' (John 4. 20-23). In Jesus, it seems the shepherding God has come to seek out any – from whatever race or creed or nation – who will to worship in truth.

But notice, this is not an easy or content-less universalism. Jesus speaks of his sheep knowing *his* voice. There's particularity here. If we are to become one flock there's a requirement to discern the voice of the good shepherd from the voice of the hired hands, the true God from idols. What are the criteria for this? Jesus says, 'The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away and the wolf snatches them and scatters them'. The hired hand is ultimately only concerned for themselves and will not protect the sheep from forces of destruction and death. The good shepherd is the one who lays down his life for the sheep.

In other words, Jesus is saying, the Good Shepherd, the God we are called to worship and obey, is steadfast, self-offering love and comes only ever to enable life.

So if some supposed divinity leads you to hate and scatter, requires you to participate in injustice or violence, is not with and for you but exploits and abuses you then such a god is not true. Such a leader is not worthy of you. This is the discernment that confronted those who encountered Jesus. He didn't look like what they expected God to be. Some then said, 'he has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?' But others tuned in to the deeper resonance: 'These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?' (John 10.21).

The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel in Babylonia; to the woman in Samaria; to the villages of Judea and Galilee. These are lands in which a profound theological insight and imaginary was forged, the promise of the possibility of 'one flock', one humanity drawn together into rich pasture by the voice of the One Shepherd who loves us all. In our day, we call these lands Palestine, Israel, Iraq, Syria and Iran. There's a bitter or tragic irony in the fact that, here, now, in place of one flock millions are scattered and divided by hatred and fear, in place of rich pasture millions are starving and dying and the land itself is laid waste, in place of one shepherd there are hired hands in every nation seeking to exploit the sheep, sow confusion, refuse responsibility and lead to destruction.

We are called to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. To discern his ways so as to become good shepherds in our turn. Feed my sheep, says Jesus. Tend my lambs. Whatever the temples collapsing around us, to this may we be true.