

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: John Chapter 10: Some Notes

We have just heard that sheep are much brighter than many of us have thought. They not only recognise and respond to particular human voices, they also recognise and respond to particular human faces. This adds something to this chapter on sheep and shepherds and sheepfolds. Judaea was a sheep land, and sheep and shepherds were the obvious reference point for any talk on following, leading, safe spaces, looking after, responsibility, accountability, and (on the part of the shepherd) self sacrifice. Our notions (if any) of what shepherds do in Britain in 2017 probably don't help much... except when we recall lambing (up all night, and each ewe and lamb matters), mid-winter snow rescues of buried sheep, flock disease outbreaks, and the occasional picture of a shepherd carrying a sheep. I've helped rounding up sheep: they are big... though of course our sheep get more to eat.

Apart from wolves and bears and lions, and lack of walls, and steep rocks (though we have those too in some places), one big difference between there and then and here and now is that Jewish sheep were kept alive for years for their wool, rather than (in an artificial fibre age) having short lives and going for sheep meat (as lamb rather than mutton).

In terms of English usage, think "pastor" and "pastoral", and bishop's crook. Vicars are shepherds, though that terminology probably doesn't mean a great deal to the average parishioner in an urban parish.

Old Testament references are numerous, but savour Ezekiel 34 – God and God's Messiah as Shepherds. Then there is Psalm 23. But also keep in mind Psalm 82 verse 6 where judges (and maybe all Jews) are called "gods" – which explains Jesus' otherwise puzzling response to the challenge that he was rating himself alongside God.

Another bit of useful background is that the Feast of Hannukah/Feast of Dedication celebrated the Maccabees cleansing and re-dedication of the Temple, and has a lot to do with lights and light. Kingship was a Hannukah theme. Our Christmas Day date probably has a much to do with Hannukah as it has with pagan festivals. Note that this particular December festival was the one before the Spring Crucifixion. P.S. Note that the Greek has Jesus saying that he and the Father are AT ONE.

The debate about leadership styles and responsibilities is very much alive in today's world – in Church as well as in State. It is worth reflecting on this as we read about Jesus and the Messiah debate. The Trump saga tends to suggest that we make leaders in our own image. Pope Francis? Talking of Pope Francis... William Barclay makes the point that "one flock and one shepherd" doesn't