

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Parables Notes

Monday February 16th: The Good Shepherd; John 10: 1-18: Host Andy, Lead Andy: Judaea was a sheep country more than it was an agricultural country. Abel was a shepherd, Abraham was a shepherd, Lot was a shepherd, Jacob was a shepherd, Isaac was a shepherd, Joseph was a shepherd, Moses was a shepherd, Amos was a shepherd, Saul was a shepherd, David was a shepherd.....

Shepherd references include (best-known) Psalm 23, Isaiah 40, Ezekiel 34. The Jewish tradition was that Moses chose God because he had proved himself a good shepherd. The shepherd carried a scrip/ purse containing his food, a sling to protect his sheep, a rod (club) to deal with threats, a (pastoral) staff/crook for rescues or to block the fold entry. There were 2 sorts of sheep fold: walled with a door/gate for the communal village sheep fold; walled with an opening protected by the shepherd on the hillside. With no fences etc, the plateau sheep country had dangerous edges and was vulnerable to predators and thieves. The shepherd gathered, protected, led, knew (as individuals and as a flock), and gave his life for, his sheep. Some shepherds owned their sheep. Sheep in that country at that time were kept mainly for their wool, so many of them lived long enough to be known “personally”.

Jews were not alone in having a shepherd tradition: Homer (Ancient Greece) said “All kings are shepherds of their people”.

Note that in the parable “One fold” is the wrong translation. It is “One flock”! That has implications for the argument about One Church!! Good Shepherd uses “good” in the professional plus sense: good = ideal. Note that THE CROSS was a choice, not just something inflicted on Christ.

John tends not to tell the familiar parables – leaving that to the earlier Gospel writers. He doesn’t use the term “parable”, but speaks wayside discussions. (He doesn’t record “miracles”, but “signs”. He quotes more Jesus words than the other Gospel writers.) John reports “Good Shepherd” to emphasis the concept. As regards “False shepherds”, there were many insurrectionists in recent Jewish history.

Any drawbacks in the sheep/shepherd terminology – e.g. if you have never seen a sheep or met a shepherd?

Monday February 23rd: The valley of dry bones: Ezekiel 37: 1-4: Host Andy, Lead Miranda

Maybe prompted by the sight of a battlefield where only the bleached bones were left, unburied. (I sometimes wonder about the propriety of archaeologists digging people up.) A glance back to Genesis 2: 7 and God breathing life into bodies. This is a picture of people spiritually dead and a nation scattered, rather than something about the physical resurrection of humans after death: belief in physical resurrection at this time was very

vague. Judah and Israel had been destroyed/scattered and had very much lost heart and purpose. (The parable that follows focuses on the uniting of the divided kingdoms.) This is perhaps the most memorable restoration picture. The Hebrew word *ruach* appears 10 times: variously translated as spirit, breath, wind. See Revelation 3.1 and Romans 8:11 re spiritual death and life. People can recognise spiritual death, or kid themselves that they are doing just fine.

Maybe we need to acknowledge a difference between loss of enthusiasm and spiritual death. I'm not sure that everybody can live perpetually on a conversion high! I remember someone being thrilled by her Confirmation, going a bit flat, and then having another conversion experience. You can imagine a long established priest being emotionally in a rather different place from the newly ordained priest?

I seem to remember a valley of dry bones plot somewhere in Lord of the Rings??

Monday March 2nd: The potter and the clay: Jeremiah 18: 1-10. Host Andy, Lead Brian.

See also Isaiah 29.16, 45.9, 64.8 God at work. Romans 9.21. If you can track it down, the final verses of Robert Browning's poem Rabbi Ben Ezra are worth reading – they stem from this Jeremiah passage. This is, of course, an action rather than a words parable. The potter does not seem to know he is being observed. Am I right in thinking that potter is seen more as a female occupation these days?

Maybe the parable isn't entirely apt? Clay does what it is told. It can't go off and do its own thing? We are not passive: we can make choices, good and bad,