

SERMON

I AM The Good Shepherd (John 10:1-21)

Last week was the London Baptist Association Ministers' Consultation at High Leighs in Hoddesdon, near Hertford. It is held every year in early February. It is a gathering of LBA ministers and their spouses. It is not compulsory, but it is a good time to meet with other ministers in the Association and also to gain some teaching, some input. It is called a consultation, I believe, because part of the input is from the ministers and their spouses, so it is not all just a speaker at the front.

When I was in the Eastern Baptist Association they had a similar event in late February in High Leighs called the Eastern Baptist Association Ministers' Conference. One year I was there, without Sue when I heard a voice behind me shout, 'Richard, Richard' in a way that I had heard before.

My blood rang cold – what was Sue doing at High Leighs? Why had she made the trip down here? So I turned round and could find her nowhere in the room. I was confused. Was it a message from God? Was I going mad, hearing voices? Then, later that day I heard again from behind me, 'Richard, Richard' in the same voice. I turned immediately and saw one of the Regional Ministers of the EBA with his wife quickly walking towards him saying again, 'Richard, Richard.' The mystery was then solved. The RM was Richard Soar and it had been his wife, Jill, calling him and so I then had to train myself to unhear, in a way, her voice calling for her husband because it was very similar, very close, just in that word, Richard, to Sue.

“The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep....the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” (John 10:2-3 NIV)

““I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me...I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” (John 10:14-16 NIV)

The sheep know the voice of the shepherd, just as we know voices. A husband knows the voice of his wife, even if he tries to ignore it at times! But how? How do the sheep know the voice of the shepherd?

A couple of things:

- We have to remember that in the time of Jesus, in the Middle East, in stead of sheep being driven and the shepherd having sheep dogs, the shepherd would walk in front of the sheep and call them to follow him.
- The shepherd would live with the sheep for many days and nights at a time. He would live with them, especially if they were his own sheep. This led to them being together in adversity and danger. David in talking to King Saul about why he could take the giant Goliath on and be assured of victory was because as he said

“...”Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.” Saul said to David, “Go, and the LORD be with you.”” (1 Samuel 17:34-37 NIV)

David knew that God was with him, but he also had the confidence of experiment with him, and he knew his sheep and they knew him.

Do you know the voice of God, do you know the voice of Jesus? One of the hardest things for many people is guidance, is knowing God’s will in my life? What does God want me to do? What job should I have? Where do I live? What church do I go to? All these are questions that we may, some do, expect God to direct us.

For some it seems so easy. You hear them say that God directed them to do this or to do that. God spoke to me and so..... or I had this tremendous burden and I knew I just had to....., and it all seems so simple. But for others it seems as if God never directs in this direct way.

Some of those who wait for the burden, for the voice of God to speak directly, and I know that God does do that to some, but others use it as a means of not doing the obvious. They have to be burdened, spoken to by God directly to give pastoral care to someone. They have to be burdened, spoken to directly to offer help when they are the obvious person to give it. But the real answer is that they do not really want to do anything, to put themselves out and so they do nothing. Sadly there are Christians like that, but not that many.

So how does God guide, how do we hear his voice?

- Some hear God direct. They hear an audible voice.
- Some hear God through pictures. Sounds odd that, but some people are directed by pictures that God gives them.
- Some hear through the written word. This is through the Bible
- Some hear through feelings. They feel something quite intense, or an inner peace and they know that God is directing them, is speaking to them and they listen. For me personally, as you know I am more the logical type of person than the touchy feely type of person so when I feel something is wrong, I listen very, very carefully because I know that God is speaking.
- Some hear through circumstances. They are attuned to what God is saying through the things that are happening around them. However this should be used with care as a difficult circumstance could be God trying to say, ‘No,’ or it could be the devil trying to stop a certain course of action taking place.

It is always best not to rely on just one thing because God is gracious and he knows that we sometime mishear his voice, or that the devil attempts to imitate his voice so as to lead us down a wrong track. So what God does is that he uses more than one method to direct, especially if it over something big.

And there are ways of knowing when it isn’t God speaking, when it is not his voice.

- Does it conflict, go against what the Bible says? If it does, then no matter how much I may feel it is from God, then it is not. God can never contradict himself.

- Also as we have just seen God often uses more than one way to direct and if through different means we are getting a confused signal, different ways are saying different things, then do not. God is not a God of confusion, but one of peace.

“For God is not a God of disorder but of peace...” (1 Corinthians 14:33 NIV)

Paul was writing there about order in a service, but it can be applied to our directional life. God does not want us to be confused about his voice, but to know it and go with it, whether that be into the green pastures, or through the valley of the shadow of death. God is still there and directing us. Today there are too many who preach a gospel of health and wealth or who use the line, “The more you give, the more that God will give you back in return. God is no one’s debtor, so just send us a cheque for.... With your request for prayer and we will pray for you and God will bless you far more than you can even imagine.” Sounds great, but at times God does lead us through some dark times, but he is there, looking after, looking out for his sheep.

What does God says about the other type of shepherd who does not look after the sheep? Turn with me to Jeremiah 23, page 782, but keep a finger in John 10

“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," declares the LORD. "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD.

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness." (Jeremiah 23:1-6 NIV)

The bad shepherd will scatter a flock, they will drive them away, but God gathers the flock together. We have already read in John 10:11

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep." (John 10:11-15 NIV)

Jesus has laid down his life for you and me. His life was laid on a cross so that we can know him. He is the Good Shepherd. Just as David fought off the lion, so we have the protection of God from Satan of whom it is said

“...Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8 NIV)

But perhaps back to the original question. How do we know when the Good Shepherd is speaking to and that it is not our own voice or that of Satan's. The answer is simple really 'Spend time with Jesus'. But we have to find our own way of doing that.

- For some it is making a special place in the house, a quiet corner and going there to be alone with God.
- For one man, who was a principal of a Bible College it was not to go to his study because he found that the work that was there in the study was too great a pull for him.
- For some they find they pray better with others, so why not recognise that and so agree to meet with a friend at an agreed time and pray with that friend
- Make sure you do spend some time with God. When I am taking a couple through marriage preparation, one of things that comes up is time together, with no-one else around. I tell them to put a cross through a date, or an evening and then if someone rings up and asks if they are busy and it is that night, then they can say that they are, because they are spending time with each other.
- For some it is going on a retreat, a time – it doesn't have to be long – where one is by oneself with God and there are no other distractions around.

But I haven't got the time for any of that. My life is so busy with work, family, etc, etc, etc. But maybe that is why you have lost the knowledge of the voice of Jesus and so life seems hard, and prayer seems clinical and a waste of time and the Bible when I do read it. In a recent survey the following results were found:

- 27% of English churchgoers across all denominations read the Bible at least once a week.
- Those attending New and Pentecostal churches were the most avid readers, with 66% and 64% respectively reading the Bible at least once a week.
- Of those who said they were mainstream evangelicals just 26% said they read the Bible personally at least once a week.
- Those aged under 20 read the Bible least of all age-groups, while those aged 20 to 29 read it most, followed by those aged 85 and over.
- Those who attend church at least once a week read the Bible most, 30%, but those who attend fortnightly or monthly read it less, 20%.

In what bracket are you? Jesus gave his life for us as the Good Shepherd, ought we not to get to know him, so we can be in his one flock and hear his voice. Remember if we stray, just like the story of the shepherd in Luke 15 who found one of his sheep was missing, went out to search for him, to rescue him and to carry him back to the fold. Jesus will come after us, rescue us and carry us back as our last hymn says '*Like a shepherd, Jesus will guard His children, In His arms He carries them all day long*'. That is the grace and mercy of our God.