

ALL AGE ADDRESS 3 MAY 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Have you been asked this question before – If you were an animal, which one would you be?



Would you be a wild horse, galloping through the plains and forests?



Or would you be a beautiful chameleon, always changing colour to blend in with your background?



Perhaps you are a lion, hunting for prey, or just lying around looking magnificent?



Or maybe you're a domestic animal instead, a pet, like a cat or a dog, happy to have cuddles and be someone's best friend?



Or maybe you're a farm animal, a working animal, giving food to people and living alongside them, like a cow or a chicken?

In today's Gospel reading Jesus doesn't give us a choice as to which animal we want to be.



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In the Gospel reading today, Jesus talks about his followers (that's us, you and me) as though we are sheep. Now, that's probably not the animal most of us would choose. Sheep tend to be seen as rather stupid and easily scared. Sheep need to be led to food and water, because they can't find it themselves. Sheep need rest in a safe place. Sheep are easy prey for animals like wolves and loose dogs.. Sheep tend to wander off and get lost. And of course most of us would much rather not be sheepish.

[Aside for the adults: Flocks of sheep were very much part of the lives of Jesus' hearers: and the image of leaders as shepherds would also have been very familiar to Jews of Jesus' era. After all, King David, greatest of all the Kings of Judah, was a real shepherd; in Ezekiel's prophecies, he famously describes the leaders of Israel as wicked, greedy and incompetent shepherds. "Thus says the Lord God: 'Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not the shepherds feed the sheep?...The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured 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 34: 2-4) And the prophecy goes on: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock..... so will I seek out my sheep..... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep" (Ezekiel 34:11, 15). So the idea not only of earthly rulers as shepherds, but also of God as the ultimate shepherd, would have been part of the background to Jesus' teaching .]



And yet, we're saying that our messages today are good news for sheep (that's us, you and me!). We'll look mostly at Psalm 23.

¹ The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

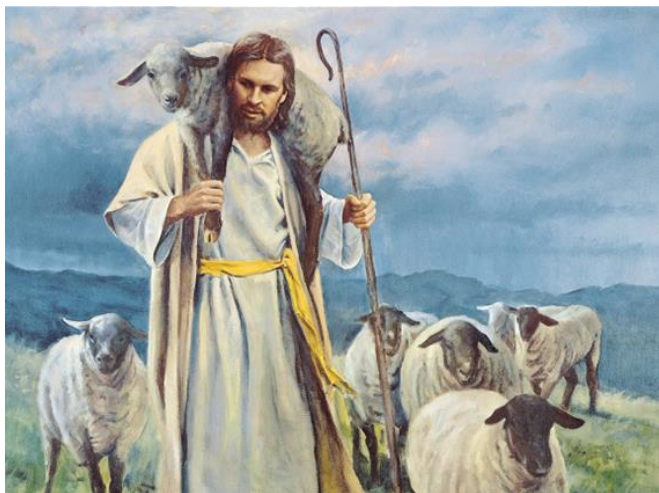
² He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.



The best news is the shepherd, the person looking after us, is Jesus Christ himself.

So what does **Psalm 23** tell us about the shepherd, and the way that God looks after us?

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² **He makes me lie down in green pastures;**

Sheep eat grass; and green here means fresh; so Jesus, too, leads us to the best and freshest place.

he leads me beside still waters;

Sheep drown in running water, in streams and rivers, because they are so heavy in their wool and they can't swim. So, shepherds must lead them to places where they can get water safely.

So Jesus also keeps us from getting into places that are dangerous for us.

³ **he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.**

Sheep wander and get into places they can't get out of – ditches, swamps, tangled up in barbed wire; and people, too, can wander from the right path and get lost. But Jesus guides to live in the right way, and walks beside us, or leads us, so that we don't get lost and live in the wrong way.

⁴ **Even though I walk through the darkest valley,**

I fear no evil; for you are with me;

Sheep get scared really easily, and they need a shepherd to calm their fears. If we walk with Jesus, he is always with us, and stops us from feeling scared.



your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

This is a shepherd's crook! With this the shepherd can fight off wild animals, hook the sheep out of danger, and walk more easily in rough places.

⁵ **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;**

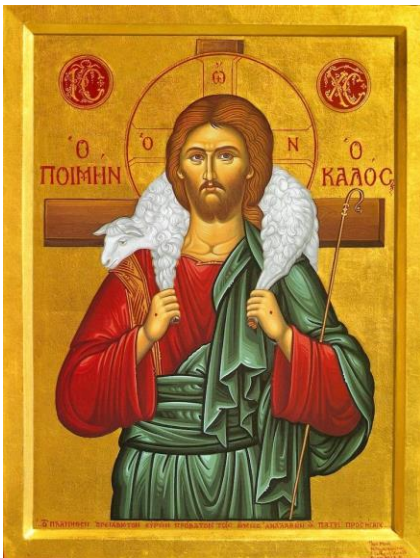
Remember that the shepherd makes sure that his flock are always fed; so God, too, makes sure that we have the Bible, and prayer, and each other, to feed our minds and our souls, even when there are difficult people and things all around us.

you anoint my head with oil;

Oil was used by healers in Jesus' day as a medicine; shepherds were also doctors and healers for their sheep, because in Jesus' time there weren't any vets to look after animals. And Jesus heals us, too, when we are hurting or sick.

my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.



So when Jesus is our Good Shepherd, carrying us on his shoulders when we are tired, or hurting, or lonely, goodness is all around us, keeping us safe from harm, and bringing us love and mercy.

Amen.