

Easter 4 / May 8, 2022

Acts 20:21

“How I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The image of shepherd and sheep runs through scripture. In the 23rd Psalm King David sings, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.” The Lord is the shepherd and the children of Israel are the sheep of His pasture. Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd. The sheep hear His voice and follow Him. He lays down His life for the sheep and no one is able to steal them from His hand. Jesus is both shepherd and sheep. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He became one with the sheep in sharing our humanity. He took the place of the sheep in bearing our sin on the cross. He is the Lamb who was slain and who with His blood, redeemed the sheep from the penalty of their sin. In Revelation the image of sheep and shepherd merge into one in Christ where it says, “For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

The Lord is the true and absolute Shepherd, but in kindness He gives humans to serve as under-shepherds of His sheep. Jesus told Peter, “Feed my sheep.” In turn, Peter and the apostles entrusted the care of the church to those they trained and commissioned as shepherds. In our lesson from Acts, Paul visits the elders of the church of Ephesus to encourage them in their service to the Good Shepherd. Paul told them to, “shepherd the flock of God that is among you.” Shepherds must be watchful. Paul says, “fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.” Wolves lead people away from Christ. Faithful shepherds lead us to Jesus. He is the Good Shepherd. He lay down His life for the sheep. He took it up again in His resurrection for our salvation. Jesus leads us to the springs of living water, in repentance towards God and faith in His name. He will bring us into His Father’s house to dwell forever in the resurrection to life everlasting.

In our text St. Luke describes the meeting between St. Paul and the elders of the church of Ephesus. Paul was on his way to Jerusalem for Passover and the celebration of Jesus’ resurrection. He knew that trouble awaited him in Jerusalem. He had been forewarned by the Holy Spirit that imprisonment and afflictions awaited him in every city he visited. Jerusalem, the centre of Judaism, would be no exception. Regardless, he was determined to go, so that He might proclaim Jesus as Lord and testify to the Jews in Jerusalem of repentance towards God and faith in Jesus as the Christ.

Would you or I willingly go somewhere knowing that imprisonment and affliction awaited us? What motivated Paul to take such risks and make himself vulnerable to mistreatment, violence and imprisonment? Paul was motivated by his deep faith in Christ His Saviour and His call to preach the gospel of God’s grace. In his own words Paul was, “constrained by the Holy Spirit.” He had a burning desire fueled by the Holy Spirit, to make Jesus known as God and Saviour, to as many people as possible. No matter what happened to him, he was determined to fulfill the ministry Christ gave him to preach the gospel to both Jew and Gentile, calling all people to God in repentance and faith in Jesus.

To that end, he had spent three years among the Ephesians, “testifying both to Jews and Greeks of repentance towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” During that time, he had supported himself and his companions with his own hands, presumably by making tents for that was his trade. As well as an expression of his devotion to the gospel of Christ, it was a sign of his integrity. He wasn’t in the ‘Jesus business’ to make a name for himself and to get rich. He was a faithful shepherd. He didn’t call people to himself. He called people to Christ. Faithful shepherds lead us to the Good Shepherd. Paul led people to Jesus. He believed from the bottom of his soul that Jesus is both God and Saviour and that whoever turns to God in repentance and faith in Jesus will be saved.

Paul summoned the elders of the church to encourage their faith and to remind them of their responsibility as shepherds, to care for God’s church, “which He obtained with His own blood.” It is important for us to remember that the church is not simply a gathering of people who share an interest in God. The church is the gathering of people whom God redeemed from sin and ransomed from death, through the shedding of Christ’s blood on the cross. In 1 Corinthians Paul wrote, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.” The price was the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish. Because the church is God’s prized possession, purchased with His blood, people who hold leadership positions in the church have a great responsibility; to the people in their care and most importantly to God, to whom we will have to give an account.

Paul laboured three years among the Ephesians, again in his words, “testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” He declared himself innocent of their blood. He had made known to them the whole counsel of God by teaching the scriptures in purity and truth; and most importantly, by leading them to Jesus in repentance and faith. Faithful shepherds preach Christ crucified for our sins and lead us to faith in Him as our God and Saviour from sin, the devil and death.

Paul warned them as shepherds to watch out for teachers who would present themselves as good shepherds, but who were really wolves seeking to lead people away from Christ and the gospel of God’s grace. He said, “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw disciples after them.” How would they know if someone was leading them astray? How would we know if someone was leading us astray? Wolves in shepherds clothing make themselves known by their words. Wolves twist the words of God and lead us away from the Lamb of God. Faithful shepherds speak the words of God in truth and lead us to the Lamb who was slain. They lead us to the Good Shepherd, who speaks words of truth, forgiveness and life.

Paul had much experience with false shepherds leading the sheep astray. The letter to the Galatians was written to address this issue. Wolves in shepherds clothing led the Galatians astray by leading them away from the gospel of God’s grace. They taught that salvation was based not only upon faith in Jesus, but also upon obedience to the laws of God. Paul wrote, “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” Our works of the law don’t save us. We are saved by Christ’s work of fulfilling the law, received by us through faith in His name.

Wolves in shepherds clothing lead us astray by presenting Jesus as less than the Son of God and more as a ‘good man.’ False teachers portray Jesus as a ‘teacher of morals and ethics’ instead of the Saviour, who was crucified for our sins and raised for our justification. Jesus was a great teacher, the greatest of all. He is the most perfect human being. In Him dwells the fullness of God. He is the wisdom of God in human flesh. But first and foremost, Jesus is our Redeemer, who sacrificed Himself for our sins and rose to be our Saviour.

False teachers lead people astray by twisting the things of God. Rather than leading us to the cross and the gospel of God’s grace, they lead us to obedience to the law, to rules the teachers invented themselves or to something in ourselves. In one way or another, false shepherds led us to seek a way of salvation other than through faith in Jesus and the sacrifice of His cross. Jesus taught the way of salvation by showing Himself to be the Saviour. He proclaims Himself the way of salvation, the truth and the life. He says no one comes to the Father except through Him. He promises that everyone who calls on His name for salvation will be saved.

On the Sunday of the Good Shepherd, we give thanks for our Great Shepherd Jesus. We listen to His voice. We follow His call. We remember that faithful shepherds speak His words in purity and truth. Faithful shepherds proclaim Christ crucified for our sins. They lead us to Jesus as our Saviour, so we may receive forgiveness and have life in His name. God bless us always to hear His voice and follow His call in repentance and faith in His name. Amen.