

When we here someone say ***I am***, we're usually expecting to hear something about who that person is or what they're feeling. I am a Glentoran supporter, or a Liverpool supporter tells you something about me. If you here that I am happy, or sad, angry or joyful, again that tells you something about me. I will leave it to you to decide which of those emotions are most likely to be connected to the football teams I support, and I hope you understand this is only an illustration.

When Jesus says I am, we are most defiantly learning something about him, but we're also learning something about who we are, because our identity is closely connected to Jesus and how we respond to him. We're also learning something about the world around us and the people and things that influence us, because again, those things are connected to who Jesus is. When we understand Jesus, we understand so much more about ourselves and the world in which we live.

We see this quite clearly when he said ***I am the Good Shepherd***. The good shepherd is Jesus, the sheep are you and me, but they also include everyone else who doesn't come to church or believe in Jesus. The hired hand, he is the people, the things, the ideologies and beliefs that influence us.

So, let's try and understand what Jesus is teaching us here.

We are the sheep. Here we have a picture of the sheep following Jesus, they know Jesus and they are secure with Jesus (the Good Shepherd). When we follow this idea of being sheep through the whole story of scripture, we find that this was not and is not always the case. In 1 Kings, Ezekiel and Zechariah we are told the people are like sheep without a shepherd. They are described as afflicted, lost and wandering, food for wild beasts. Not exactly the picture of peace or well-being.

Isaiah said ***we all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way.*** (Isaiah 53:6)

I am not a farmer (there is something else you have learned about me), but I did spend considerable time with farmers in Moneydig and my old boss in Templepatrick, Richard Kerr, used to be a sheep farmer. The one thing I have picked up about sheep is that they are hard to look after. They will do their best to escape, they do their best to get into life threatening trouble, when they get into bother more often than not, they are helpless. They usually can't get themselves to safety.

Sheep need a shepherd to look after them they need a shepherd to rescue them.

So, Jesus is saying to us that we are just like sheep. Left to our own devices we find ourselves in a situation that we can't get out of. We are incapable of looking after ourselves. Just to be clear, Jesus is talking about our spiritual health here. We are separated from God, it is not just that we are lost, we have wandered away from God. We made the choice to leave the security of the shepherd and now we cannot find our way back.

We are so lost we can't even stumble back by accident, we can't drive round and round hoping to stumble on the right road, the right gate. We are lost.

Indeed, when Jesus told the parable of the lost sheep, you will remember it was the shepherd who set out to look for the sheep, it was the shepherd who lifted it up onto his shoulders and it was the shepherd who returned it to the flock. This is the extent of our problem, and it applies to each and every one of us. Don't be fooled into thinking that because we come to church, or because there is a history of belief in our families that we are exempt. ***We all like sheep have gone astray.***

The answer is that we need a shepherd. We need someone to come and rescue us.

When Jesus talked about the hired hand, he was talking about people and ideas that seem to promise us that they can bring us closer to God, but ultimately, they fail because they can't rescue us from sin.

These hired hands are really very easy to spot, if you know what you are looking for. If people are constantly telling you if you do this, if you do that, then you will be saved. They are the hired hands. They can sound as though they are telling us some very sensible things. If you repent, then God will save you. If you have more faith, then God will save you. If you stop doing one thing and start doing another thing, if you become more like us, if you, if you, if you... What are we being told here? If you can do enough then you will have earned or merited a response from God. (To be clear repentance is good and necessary, but repenting does not earn a response from God, it something that flows in response to what God has done for us.)

The trouble with this is, well there are a lot of things that trouble me about this, but we will focus on this one. So, if you will only do... then God will respond to you. What happens if I lapse? What happens if I give into temptation, what do I do then? Actually, we see this time and time again in the church. We put so much emphasis on what we must do that when we fall, when we sin, when we fail – all too often there is no way back. This is especially true today with our cancel culture. If I stand up here and say something inappropriate. I am cancelled. There is no redemption, no restoration – it is over.

The hired hand, the people, the things I have put my trust in at the first sight of trouble they run, and I am left with no way of dealing with my sin. I am left as one of the lost sheep, gone astray and no-one is looking for me. I am simply left to live with the consequences of my sin. If you think I've got this wrong – we all know Portstewart has been in the news lately because individuals have been accused of sinning. What has the response been... we have judged in such a way that there is no way back... I am not downplaying the seriousness of sin, crime, or the effects of sin and crime on others, nor am I saying justice should not be served. But all too often when one from the flock is lost, we discover it is the hired hand who has been looking after them and so has no interest in searching that sheep out.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd; he is not like the hired hand... ***I lay down my life for the sheep.*** We started by talking about how the sheep are at peace and secure with the shepherd, this is because it is only the shepherd who defends the sheep. It is only the shepherd who searches out the sheep. Only the shepherd will fight off the wild animals. It is only Jesus who can deal with our sin, it is only Jesus who can bring us back into the sheep fold.

The Good Shepherd isn't asking to do things, we don't have to try and find him, he comes to us. We don't have to atone for our sin, he does that for us. We don't have to clean our act up, he

does that by declaring we are a new creation. We simply allow the shepherd to lead us. We listen to his voice and follow him. This is incredibly important, because when we fail, when we sin, instead of being cut off, or cut lose, we have a shepherd who will seek us out and speak to us again, who will bring us back to a place where we follow him once more.

Yes, he will lead us in such a way that we are repenting and confessing sin, he will lead us in a way that changes how we live, but he leads us in that, these are not things that have to be done in order to hear him or know him, they come from hearing and knowing Jesus. I hope that makes sense.

Crucially there is something else in this that we need to take hold of. For many people they hear this and think that's grand, but I have never come to church, I have never believed, I have never understood or even cared. There is no place for me in this story. This is all for sheep who have gotten lost, who once belonged. I have never belonged.

***I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold, I must bring them also.*** (John 10:16) This is as much for you as anyone else. Jesus the Good Shepherd is seeking out you and the rules for you are the same for everyone else. You don't have to do anything... you don't have to be a better church attender, you don't have to clean yourself up, you don't have to make a stack of changes. You hear Jesus speaking to you and you follow, now, as you are. All the other stuff will come because you are following.

Why can Jesus do this, what makes him the good shepherd, why is it we don't have to do a whole lot of things first. Let's go back to Isaiah. ***We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*** (Isaiah 53:6)

We don't have a lot to do, because Jesus has done everything, he laid down his life for us in order that we would be able to take up a new life with him. This is the truth of Jesus; this is the truth we are to take hold of and trust in. I am the Good Shepherd.

It seems there were two responses to Jesus' declaration. The first was to think him and demon possessed. To ignore everything he had said or dismiss it as nonsense. That is one response. If that's case, there is nothing more to consider.

The second response was to acknowledge that actually these were not the words of a mad man, or a demon possessed man. It was to look around and see what Jesus had been doing and understand there was something very important in what he was saying.

If this our response, then we do have to think things through a little bit more. Will we follow Jesus' voice, will we listen to him and what does that look like. If this is your response, I am going to ask you to make yourself known to me so as you can be helped and nurtured, encouraged and strengthened, so as we can pray for you and with you.