

Glimpses of God

Session 2: CD Track [15]

THE SHEPHERD WHO GUARDS AND GUIDES HIS PEOPLE

The notion of the Good Shepherd is a key theme in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. But is it still applicable today? Shirley Williams thinks it is – but more specifically in reference to Jesus.

SW: Most Christians think about the Good Shepherd in terms of Jesus rather than of God. Because God is such a huge concept to try and get one's mind around that the shepherd image conflicts to some extent. I mean, the way I tend to see God is more in terms of Matthew Arnold – 'the forces of the sea, the forces of the sky; the stars in the sky' and so forth. It's the universal that is the closest I get to having some sense of what God is – and his omnipotence and so forth. I think in the case of Christ he is, he personalises, he humanises the concept of God. And therefore the idea of the Good Shepherd, which is obviously more appropriate to scriptural times than to now – but nevertheless echoes now – is something most of us associate with Jesus Christ.

[16] *Part of the imagery of shepherding is of guiding and of protecting. I asked David Wilkinson whether he could give an example of God's guidance, and he said that whilst he felt clearly guided as a young man, as he got older he felt much less certain about it. It worried him until he realised why that is.*

DW: As we grow older God wants us to take more responsibility. Just as a parent, there's a certain level of guidance that I give to my children when they're

two or four year old, to what I give them now when they're eighteen and sixteen, as we grow in Christian faith there are moments where God actually says to us: 'what do you think? What do you want to do? You know my will, you know what I'm about, you know what it means to be a disciple. There may be a number of options – now learn through taking responsibility.' And I found that a very helpful way of understanding how God may guide as you grow as a Christian.

[17] *What about feeling protected by the Good Shepherd? Stephen Cottrell cites the Old Testament story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego being thrown by King Nebuchadnezzar into the fiery furnace, for not worshipping a golden idol. And the story goes they weren't burnt. But it's not their survival that impresses Stephen – rather, it's their attitude before they're thrown in.*

SC: Before they're thrown into the fire they say to King Nebuchadnezzar, 'whether our God saves us or not, we're not going to bow down and worship this great statue you've made.' Now it's that attitude which I think is the really godly, Christian one. That we say to the world, 'well, whether I suffer or not – and I know I will, we're all going to suffer, we're all going to die – but whatever happens to me, I'm going to be true to my Christian faith and to my Christian principles. God may save me in the way that I hope he might, or he may not. But that isn't going to change the fact that I'm going to carry on believing and behaving in this way.'

[18] *Still in the Old Testament, the best known Shepherd passage is Psalm 23 The Lord's my Shepherd, which contains the famous verse, 'though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no*

evil'. I asked David what he could say that might help those who are right there now.

DW: In the very honest way of trying to help people we say some really silly things. I remember a friend of mine saying that, when he was a small boy, his sister was killed in a road accident. And at the funeral service the vicar, well meaning – dealing with the death of a child – said, 'God wanted another star in heaven.' At that point my friend, as a seven year-old, said, 'what rubbish! First of all, that's not what stars are about anyway. And second, that doesn't do any justice to the person who was drunk-driving, who killed my sister.' Now, I think theology, and thinking through these issues, often tells us what not to say in the shadow of the valley of death, rather than what to say. It cautions us about giving easy answers. And it reminds us that sometimes we just have to live with uncertainty, and without a neat and easy picture to reply.

[19] *It was quite popular some years ago to try to rewrite the 23rd Psalm into current images: 'The Lord is my Social Worker' and so on – to make it somehow more relevant. But Stephen thinks that the sheep/shepherd image still works well, if we understand its history and context properly.*

SW: The biblical shepherds led from the front themselves. Lived *with* the sheep, you know that's – lived out in the mountains with the sheep. It was a dangerous, wild kind of existence. The shepherd often was the gate to the sheepfold, you know – literally protecting them. There's a wonderful example in the David narratives, where, you know, the young shepherd boy, David, is questioned about whether he's the right man to go out and slay Goliath.

Well, David puffs himself up and in his defence says, 'I'm a shepherd! If a lion comes into the fold I kill it! And I'm jolly well going to go and kill this giant, Goliath!' So yes, 'shepherd' in the Bible is very different from 'shepherd' in our imaginations today. So should we get rid of the shepherd language? I'm not so sure.

[20] *David does think there is need to represent biblical material for our own time.*

DW: For me, part of the challenge for the Church is, begin to think about how we translate the Scriptures into the indigenous language of city-dwellers; what it means for me to talk about the guidance and providence of God within the area of science, where people want to ask questions – not of the sheep and the shepherd, but of quantum theory and chaos, and how does God actually relate to the science of the world.

[21] *The last words of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, in Matthew's Gospel are: 'Lo, I am with you always.' I asked David and Stephen to reflect on this promise.*

DW: Looking back on a few decades now of being a Christian, there are moments where I've sensed the presence of God – but not until very much later seen the workings of God. And there have been times when I've looked back, even without a sense of the presence of God, and seen the power of God at work. It's often only with hindsight that I see that.

SC: I do believe Jesus is with me always. But I don't always – it doesn't always feel like that. And I shouldn't simply rely on my feelings, which are always going to let me down, or be subject to my mood and other things. Rather, I must look to