Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Just two weeks ago I read about a new order of service for the Anglican Church in England. On December 11th, the House of Bishops published pastoral guidelines for a gender transition service. This service allows a person who identifies as a different gender than the sex they were born with to celebrate their new identity and it also gives the church the opportunity to publicly and officially recognize this person’s new identity. So the person reaffirms their baptism with their new name and the minister lays hands on them and prays for them using their new name.

And the document says these guidelines are “*rooted in Scripture*.” And just in case you are wondering, Really?, the passage noted is Matthew 19 where the disciples tried to keep children away from Jesus and He “*said, ‘Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.’ And He laid his hands on them and went away*.”

Well congregation, this is an example of appalling leadership in the church. The House of Bishops is guilty of teaching false doctrine by ignoring the plain teaching of the Bible about our God-given identity as male and female and misusing Scripture.

And sadly, bad leadership has been a constant problem for the church of God. It was a problem way back in Ezekiel’s day as we read earlier. **Ezekiel** lived around 600 years before Christ and he was one of those exiled to Babylon from Israel. And one of the main reasons for the exile was the bad leadership of the kings and priests. They were supposed to be good shepherds of the people, but instead they were corrupt and immoral and idolatrous and uncaring and greedy and unjust. And that’s what Ezekiel wrote about in chapter 34 – the bad shepherds of Israel and God’s promise that one day He would come and shepherd His people, Himself.

Well, you will notice that v22 of this passage speaks about the **Feast of Dedication**. This Feast is still celebrated by Jews today and is commonly known as Hannukah. It is celebrated on a fixed date in the Hebrew calendar, which can be anytime from late November to late December in our calendar. It celebrates the rededication of the Jerusalem temple that took place in 165 BC.

* What had happened was that after the Jews returned from exile to Jerusalem, they became part of the **Greek** empire of Alexander the Great around 300 BC. And Alexander wanted his whole Empire to be Greek in language and politics and culture and religion. And many of the Jewish leaders embraced this idea. For example, High Priests of the time corrupted Temple worship by ignoring God’s commands and embracing Greek practice. And in 167 BC, the ruler of that region, Antiochus Epiphanes, had an altar to Zeus set up in the temple, he banned circumcision, and he ordered pigs to be sacrificed on the temple altar and their blood sprayed throughout the temple. And a lot of this was done with the support of the Jewish leaders.
* Well, this led to civil war between conservative Jews and those Jews who wanted to be Greek. The conservative Jews were led by a family called the **Maccabees**. And in 165 BC, under Jason Maccabee, the Temple was recaptured, cleansed, and rededicated.
* And every year after that, the Feast of Dedication was celebrated by the Jews. And during the Feast, they read Ezekiel 34 and they asked hard questions about bad leaders and false shepherds – Why did this happen? Is it happening again today? How can a leader be a *good* shepherd? When will THE Good Shepherd come? So those were the questions being asked as Jesus said what He said here in Ch. 10.

But remember also **what happened in ch. 9**. The chapter started with Jesus meeting the man born blind and healing him. But the Jewish leaders did not like what the man said about Jesus. And so, in 9:34 we read, “*They cast him out*.” They excommunicated this man from the synagogue for saying that Jesus must be from God. Well, Jesus then spoke to the man again and He told Him that though he had been cast out of the synagogue, by believing in Jesus he had come into eternal life. And Jesus then rebuked the Jewish leaders for their bad leadership, telling them that their guilt remained. So this event is the local church context for what Jesus says in ch. 10. .

So **bad leadership in the church is the context for ch. 10**. And as we consider the words of Jesus, we want to see how they beautifully draw us to Christ and how they carefully warn us about bad leaders.

Our passage divides naturally into two main sections – in vv1-5 Jesus **shares** a parable and in vv7-18 Jesus **interprets** the parable. And in v6 and vv19-21, the people **respond** to what Jesus says. But as we look at the parable and its interpretation, there are four pictures that the Lord Jesus paints: The first is of a **sheepfold** in vv1-5, the second is of a **door for the sheep** in vv7-10, the third is of a **self-sacrificing shepherd** in vv11-15, and 17-18, and the fourth is of **other sheep** in v16.

1. So let’s look at each of these pictures in turn, beginning with the **sheepfold** in vv1-5.
   1. A sheepfold is simply a walled off area where sheep are kept safe. Here in NZ, we typically think of big flocks of sheep roaming about, day and night, on grassy fields. But in Israel, once you got out of the towns and cities, you basically had rocky hillside and wilderness. And there were also thieves and predators around. So whenever the sheep needed to rest, they needed to be put into a sheepfold. Now, if you look this passage up in Bible commentaries, you will find all sorts of theories about what type or types of sheepfold Jesus uses in this chapter. I believe, as do many other commentators, that Jesus uses one type of sheepfold in vv1-5 and another type in vv7-18. But the key point is that we are talking about sheep in a sheepfold.
      1. The sheepfold in view in vv1-5 is probably the **permanent sheepfold that you would find in towns of that time**. The picture Jesus paints best describes a walled courtyard attached to a house in the town. Each shepherd would have just a few sheep that he would lead to patches of grass and water during the day. But during the night he would bring them back to the town sheepfold for safe-keeping.
      2. So in the town sheepfold you had sheep belonging to various shepherds. And a watchman would keep an eye on them during the night. And in the morning, each shepherd would come and the watchman would open the door to the sheepfold. And boys and girls, you would think that all the sheep would run straight out of the sheepfold when the door was opened. But they didn’t! The shepherd would call his sheep by name and only those sheep would walk out to him. They got so accustomed to the voice of *their* shepherd that they would not go out when other shepherds were calling, but only when they heard the voice of *their* shepherd calling *their* names!
   2. So in terms of Jesus’ original audience, what He is saying is that He is the promised shepherd of Ezekiel 34! And He knows His sheep by name and He calls them to follow Him and listen to Him. It is a very **personal and gentle and beautiful image**, isn’t it.
      1. And of course, it is contrasted with the **thieves and robbers** of v1 who are referred to elsewhere in this passage as “strangers” and “hired hands” and “wolves.” They are the Pharisees and Scribes– the Jewish leaders of this time. They too ‘call’ the sheep but they only harm or kill the sheep. And there are always thieves and robbers that trouble the church. But we shall say more about them later on.
      2. **Our focus now in on Jesus as the Shepherd**.
         1. His message to the Jews of that time is recorded in Matthew 11:28, for example, where we read Him say, “*Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls*.” And this was a staggering contrast to the preaching of the Pharisees and Scribes who just preached the law - rules!
         2. But you know, this is Jesus’ message to you here today also. Unlike those Jews, you do not have Jesus physically standing before you and speaking to you. But you hear His voice through the reading and preaching of the Bible. So right now, you are hearing the voice of Jesus. He is saying to you, “*Come to me … and I will give you rest*.”
         3. And He knows you by name. Think about that! 7 Billion people on earth at the moment. But He knows you by name. He is calling out to you! Have you come to Jesus? Will you hear His voice and come to Him today?
2. Verse 6 tells us that this was a “**figure of speech**.” In the other Gospels it would probably be called a? Parable. But those who heard this parable did not understand what Jesus was saying to them. So as we move now to the interpretation of the parable, the second picture Jesus uses is that of a **door for the sheep**, in vv7-10. In v7 He says, “*I am the door of the sheep*,” and in v9, “*I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture*.”
   1. Now, it is possible that Jesus is simply describing Himself now as the door to the sheepfold He referred to in vv1-5. But the reference to **wolves** in v12 suggests that Jesus has changed the location of the sheepfold to one that is outside the town in the threatening desert. And it was common in those times for people speaking in parables to use more than one image or location in their parables, so long as they had something in common. You see, in addition to the sheepfold in the town, shepherds would also create temporary sheepfolds out on the hillsides, so the sheep could rest and be safe. And they would do this with branches and thorn-bushes. But the shepherd himself would lie or sit at the opening of a sheepfold like this, and be the door himself, as it were. So the only way into or out of these sheepfolds was literally through the shepherd! But regardless of where the sheepfold is, the two main points being made with this picture are:
      1. First of all, that the *only* way into fellowship with God is through Jesus.
         1. And what we are talking about here is nothing less than the New of the New Testament! The time of the OT with its sacrifices and shadows of Messiah was ended. Now Jesus had come. Now the way into fellowship with God was and is Jesus.
         2. A little later on in **John 14:6**, Jesus says, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*.”
         3. The Jews and their leaders had the OT, they were circumcised, they had the temple, they did the sacrifices, they prayed to God, they gathered for worship on the Sabbath, and they tithed. And the Jewish leaders taught the people that so long as they did all these things they were the people of God. But Jesus is saying that now you must believe that I am the Promised Messiah. If you do not accept Me, though you sacrifice and tithe and pray, you are outside the kingdom; you are in unbelief.
         4. And this applies equally for us today. Many people think that every religion worships the same God by a different name and that we will all get to heaven. Uh uh! Jesus is the only ‘door’ to fellowship with God. To be a child of God, you must confess Jesus as your Saviour and Lord.
      2. But the second thing we see here is that fellowship with God is pictured as **a life of safety and abundance**! In v9 we see that those who enter by Jesus are saved and find pasture. And at the end of v10, Jesus says, “*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly*.” And abundantly means plentiful and rich and overflowingly good!
         1. Earlier I quoted the words of **Matthew 11:29** where Jesus says, “*Come to me … and you will find rest for your souls*.” And an obvious implication of these words is that those who do not come to Jesus do not have rest for their souls . You see, because God created the universe, He determines what is right and wrong. He decides who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. He provides reason and meaning and purpose. And He lays all this out in the Bible, which is His revelation of Himself and truth and salvation and morality. And at the centre of it all is His command that we believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins.
            1. So this means that abundant life can only be found in relationship with Jesus Christ. With His Spirit living in you and the Bible, as an active and participating member of a congregation, you have the abundant life. And that doesn’t mean riches and perfect health and no troubles; it means peace and objective truth and meaning and purpose and accountability. And this is the life that Christ would have us enjoy.
            2. And of course, after this life comes **eternity**. In this afternoon’s service, we are going to sing the hymn ‘*Now Thank We All Our God*.’ It includes a prayer that God would “free us from all ills in this world and the next.” And I remember that when I was young those words confused me. Thinking of heaven, I thought, what ills? There will not be any ills in heaven. Why would we ask God to free us from ills *in the next life*? But the answer is obvious, isn’t it. What is in view is hell! We are asking God to keep us from hell, because in hell there will only be ills – evil, hatred, anger, illness, terror, disease, loneliness, selfishness, violence, greed, corruption, decay, pain, sorrow, fear…
      3. Jesus is the door for the sheep; the only door into fellowship with the Father. And He came that we might have life and have it abundantly. Do you have this abundant life?
3. Well, the third picture in this passage is about a **self-sacrificing shepherd**. And we see this throughout vv11-15, and 17-18. In vv11 and 14, Jesus says, “*I am the good shepherd*.” And four times, in vv11, 15, 17 and 18, Jesus talks about laying down His life for the sheep.
   1. And the contrast here is between the shepherd as the owner of the sheep and a hired hand or paid employee. When danger comes, the paid employee cares more for Himself than he does the sheep and so he scarpers. But the owner of the sheep is a good shepherd and he is willing to face any danger to protect them. And the Lord Jesus is telling us that He is the owner/Good Shepherd who will ultimately He will lay down His life for His sheep.
      1. You see, He knew that what we needed most of all was the forgiveness of our sins. So He took our sins on Himself and endured the eternal wrath of God on the cross, so that as we believe that He did this for us, our sins are forgiven. And all those who know that Jesus died on the cross for them have Jesus as their good shepherd.
      2. And in terms of what this looks like in the believer’s life, please turn with me to the last two verses of **Psalm 28** (p. 461). Psalm 28 is a Psalm I like to read with those who are seriously ill or facing surgery. It ends with these words, “*The Lord is the strength of His people, He is the saving refuge of His anointed. Oh, save your people and bless your heritage.* *Be their Shepherd and carry them forever*.”
         1. And sometimes this prayer is answered as the Good Shepherd carries His people through surgery or through other trials. But sometimes it is answered as the Good Shepherd carries His sheep through the valley of the shadow of death to the glory of heaven.
         2. And it is a beautiful thing to share this Psalm with believers who know that both outcomes were possible. They hope to live but they are ready for death, because they trust in Christ.
         3. Is that the case with you? Do you have this peace? None of us know if we will see Monday. But we need not fear death if Jesus is our Good Shepherd. Have you trusted in Christ and repented of your sins? Are you part of a flock (church)? Are you following Christ each day by listening to His voice in His word?
4. Well the fourth and final picture in this passage is that of **other sheep** in v16. Jesus says, “*And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd*.
   1. And very briefly, Jesus is talking here about the Gentiles – those who were not Jews. The Bible teaches us that in OT times, God’s plan of salvation included just the Jews. But after the death and resurrection of Jesus, salvation would include Jew and Gentile. And that is what Jesus is speaking about here – soon He would bring in the elect Gentiles to join the elect Jews to form the one church of Christ in history.
   2. Notice though what Jesus says about these Gentile sheep; He says, “*They will listen to my voice*.” So what all of the sheep of Christ have in common is that they listen to His voice. And in the context of this passage, this also means that they do not listen to the voices of the thieves and robbers or hired men or strangers or wolves.
      1. And as we have said, in Jesus’ day, He was referring to the Pharisees and Scribes – the Jewish leaders and teachers.
         1. **Mark 11** records the time that Jesus cleansed the temple of all the money-changers and sacrifice sellers that were gathered. And they were there by invitation of the Jewish leaders, who were, of course, taking their cut of the profits. So Jesus said, “*Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers*.” In this way and in others, the Jewish leaders were literally robbing the people of their money.
         2. But the problem with the Pharisees and the Scribes was not just their desire for money but also that they taught false doctrine. In **Matthew 15:14**, we read about a time when Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and Scribes and the disciples told Jesus that He had offended them. But Jesus said, “*Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit*.” The Pharisees and Scribes, because of how they twisted or ignored the teaching of the OT, and especially now because of their failure to accept Jesus as the Son of God, could not lead the people into truth and godliness, and instead kept them in unbelief and ungodliness.
      2. But this parable of Jesus was not just appropriate for those Jews listening to Him then. False teaching is a problem you come across again and again the NT. The author of this Gospel is John. And John also wrote the three letters of John in the NT. And **1 John** is about the trouble that false teachers were causing in the church about 60 years after Jesus said these words; they had torn the congregation apart. In **Acts 20:29-30**, the Apostle Paul said to the Ephesian elders, “*I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them*.” And because these words were inspired by the Holy Spirit, they are as true today as they were then. Bad shepherds will always afflict the church.
         1. And they do this today through such things as **the prosperity gospel**. These are those TV ‘ministers’ who tell you that you can get healing or be rich or have a happy marriage if you just trust God and send in a cheque for $5000 to Rev. I-Want-To-Buy-A-Private-Jet. Now, of course, that is not what he or she calls themselves, but it is what they are all about. I saw a satirical post the other day about one of these televangelists called Benny Hinn. It said that he had caught the tiny house bug so he was downgrading to a 15 bedroom villa on the Italian coastline. People of God, such thievery is wickedness.
         2. But another very real danger today is **false teachers**. At the beginning of the service I mentioned the transgender service in the Church of England. But the push to embrace and affirm and celebrate those who change their gender is like a Tsunami that is crossing the earth. And books are being written by theologians telling us that God is fine with this. A famous example of false teaching in NZ is Professor Lloyd Geering. As a minister in the PCNZ, he denied the virgin birth and the resurrection. Heresy trial. Not guilty. More and more individuals and churches are teaching that God is fine with homosexuality. A little closer to home, two issues that have troubled our sister churches around the world are the denial of creation in six days and the opening of offices in the church to women. But the Bible is very plain that God created all things in six days and that office in the church is reserved for men only.
         3. And this is why having warned the **Ephesian elders** about the danger of wolves who would speak twisted things to draw away disciples after them, the Apostle Paul said, “*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock … to care for the church*.”And the Apostle Peter said to elders, “*Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight*.” If you were to try and draw a picture of the elder/shepherd, it should be of a man with spiritual binoculars who constantly sweeps his gaze over the flock, always on the look out for trouble.
            1. And this is why the elders don’t just let anyone into this pulpit. It is why they evaluate all the sermons preached from this pulpit. It is why they have liaisons for all of our Bible study groups. It is why they want to know what books we are using in our Bible studies. It is why I am required not only to teach the truth but to point out error.
            2. After the service, we will vote for an elder. And all of this means that our choice should not be about which of them is nicer or who we get on with, but who will shepherd the flock well?
      3. Now, perhaps with all that has been said about false teachers and false doctrine, you are tempted to despair and wonder how we can escape falling into the clutches of false teachers? Well, I am sure you have heard this illustration before, but bank tellers need to be able to recognize **counterfeit money**. And do you know how they are taught to do this? By handling heaps of genuine/real money. They become so used to genuine money that they easily recognize the fake. And that is ultimately what Jesus has called us to in this chapter. He says, My sheep know my voice. If you listen to the voice of Jesus, you will recognize and not listen to false teaching.
         1. And this is why you regularly hear the call to come to both worship services to listen to Jesus speak to you through the preaching of the Bible. You need this! And this is why you regularly hear the call to be part of a regular Bible study. You need this! And this is why you regularly hear the call to read your Bible every day. You need this. You need to hear the Good Shepherd speak to you.

At the end of this section, we read that there was “division among the Jews…” Some wrote Jesus off; others were drawn to Him. So our final question today is: Which is it for you? Do you know Jesus as your Good shepherd? Are you listening to His voice?

Let us pray.