

Of all the I Am statements – it's this one 'I am the good shepherd' that is perhaps the most loved. Our minds conjure up a somewhat sentimentalized image of a kindly man holding cuddly white lambs but as Ralph showed us last week, the life of a shepherd in ancient middle eastern times was severe, demanding and hazardous. In fact, the word 'good' here is more properly translated as 'noble' and the contrast is made between this good or noble shepherd and a hired hand. The hired hand is distinguished by his lack of commitment to the sheep. When danger comes, he flees and the flock is attacked. His own self preservation and his own self interest characterizes his position – he cares nothing for the sheep. The good shepherd, by contrast, owns the sheep which speaks to his unique, passionate commitment to them.

Of course, it was not just the world of Jesus day that was familiar with supposed shepherds who care little for their sheep or leaders who don't carry out their responsibility to care for the people.

Our world knows much about so called leaders and their self interest!

Today there is a long list of hereditary despots who control their countries and their people to their unimaginable gain and the people's unimaginable misery – the only thing that receives any protection is the wealth and

absolute power of the dictator and his inner circle. Robert Mugabe oversees a country racked with unemployment, inflation, desperate food shortages, cholera and aids epidemics and his most recent tool of violence – the brutal rape of women and girls connected to the opposition. In Africa it appears that sexual violence against women has become the weapon of choice for many – much cheaper than guns and bullets. Omar Al –Bashir in Sudan has ensued a hotbed of violence and death in Darfur, Kim Jong-il heads the worlds most repressive regime with literally millions starving whilst he builds a military machine of almost unbelievable proportions, and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia provides absolute oversight to a regime that has the most oppressed women in the world.

At this very moment, the UN is rallying against another despot Mummar al-Qaddafi in Libya but you'll have to excuse my cynicism that this too is not related to self-interest and oil, given that practically right next door in Bahrain and Yemen, the west seemingly gives its blessing to ruling regimes to do whatever is necessary to crush protest in their countries.

Yes, our world is very familiar with leaders and self interest at every level in government, business, community and even in our churches! So this imagery of a noble leader, a good shepherd who will not only ensure that this sheep are well cared for and contented, but will also protect his flock to

the extent of laying down his life for them, is very comforting and compelling.

In his self sacrifice for the sheep, Jesus presents the true model for leadership. Leadership that is not for personal glory and satisfaction, but is directed selflessly for the good of those who are led. The former is the way of the world, the way we are most familiar with; the latter is the way of Jesus.

And if we bring this down to a very personal level, instinctively many of us know how desperately we need a shepherd. I know I need leadership and guidance as I make my way on this journey called life because left to my own devices I just take too many wrong turns. And I don't think I'm alone in this – we are constantly crying out for guidance – some look for it in the strangest of places – horoscopes, psychics – others look for it in parents (now that's a novel thought for some of us) and pastors and counsellors but I have to tell you that even with the best of intentions, all of these will let us down from time to time. I love being one of your pastors and I feel incredibly privileged and honoured when you seek me out for advise or counsel but the truth is that sometimes I will let you down!

The bible tells us time and time again that there is good shepherd who knows his sheep so well that he won't ever let them down. And to understand the metaphor we have to understand that the relationship between a shepherd in Palestine and a farmer here in Australia is stark – here most sheep are kept not just for their wool but also for killing and eating, but in Palestine, most sheep are kept exclusively for wool or milk – and it was even more so in biblical days when killing a sheep for its meat was considered a massive sacrifice of the families most valued asset. So in the land of the bible, sheep were often with a shepherd for years – even for their entire lives. These shepherds knew their sheep and even gave them individual names.

In return, the sheep remembered their handler and recognised the voice of the familiar trusted shepherd.

Even today in Palestine, families keep small herds of sheep that are able to respond specifically to their keeper. This week I read the true story of a Palestinian woman who recently had her small flock confiscated by Israel security forces and convinced the authorities that she be able to reclaim them if she could pick out her sheep from the large pen of confiscated flocks. She apparently stood at the far end of the pen and the sheep, as they do, all began to move away from her in fear. Then she put a small

reed to her lips and began to play a unique call and in moments, her own sheep stopped, turned and ran back to cluster around her in response. She didn't have to pick them out, they came to her and she was able to take her flock and go.

Jesus likens the relationship between the good shepherd and his sheep to the one he and his Father have. Their relationship is profoundly intimate and loving, and stunningly Jesus says that this is what he wants the relationship between him and his sheep to be like. The other stunning aspect of Jesus as the good shepherd is his willingness to lay down his life/ to die for his sheep. Picture a flock of animals under siege – being attacked by a pack of wild animals – and the shepherd standing firm at the gate that Ralph talked about last week using stones and his staff and whatever is at his disposal to keep them at bay. He's not willing to sacrifice even one of his animals to satisfy the enemy – he wants them all to be safe, all to be saved.

I read that when cowboys in Argentina and Brazil come to a piranha infested river they will commonly protect the herd by taking one cow upstream a few hundred yards where they kill it and throw it in the river. The piranha, attracted by the blood will converge and attack the dead cow and while they're distracted the cowboys lead the rest of the herd across.

But not the good shepherd, he's not willing to sacrifice even one of his flock! He would rather he died, than one of his much loved sheep who belonged to him, and who he has known, tended and cared for from birth.

So this is the character of the shepherd; now what about his flock.

Well without wanting to cause any evolution/creation controversy, outside of the bible humans are most often likened to apes. Actually there's a great joke about this controversy – an ape was seen ambling out of a public library with a bible under one arm and a copy of Darwin's book the origin of the species under the other. A passerby asked the ape what kind of research he was doing with these 2 very different books and the ape replied 'I'm just trying to find out whether I'm my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother'!

In modern science most human drug testing is done on rats or mice so perhaps we're actually more like rodents – and some scientists and biologists suggest we're like ants or bees or dolphins because the social structures that these animals have that is so similar to human societies.

But the bible compares humans most often to sheep. David, the psalmist, a shepherd himself, used this analogy repeatedly.

Ps 100 – we are God’s people and the sheep of his pasture

Ps 77 – God, you lead your people like a flock

Ps 79 – we your people and sheep of your pasture will give you thanks forever

And of course in Ps 23 –the Lord is my shepherd.....

And what about in Isaiah where it says that (40:11) God...tends his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart. That’s undoubtedly where those lovely white fluffy images of lambs come from!

And later in John 10:27 – My sheep listen to my voice, I know them and they follow me.

I don’t know how many times we’re compared to sheep in the bible but I know it’s a lot! Now I grew up on what was essentially a sheep farm – so I know some things about sheep.

Some of my earliest childhood memories are about sheep! I vividly remember Mum nursing sick, deserted or orphaned lambs back to health – she would put them in the warming drawer of our big old wooden stove – not to roast but to keep them warm whilst she restored them with hand feeding and gentle care. Later when they got stronger we would keep them in a pen outside where they needed regular feeding – we kids loved to feed these motherless lambs – the lambs would begin a loud chorus of baaing long before it was actually time to feed them and we would warm big bottles of milk and sometimes get knocked over in the rush as we went into the pen. The lambs would suck the teat on the bottle ferociously and their tails would wag like mad the whole time with pleasure. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience!

So I know sheep and I have to say that past the fluffy white lamb stage, sheep are not very attractive creatures! Even lambs are dirty and wayward and if you've ever seen the southern end of a northbound herd, you'll understand what I'm saying! Sheep are not very intelligent; politically correct speech for dumb, they're stubborn, they wander aimlessly and get themselves into trouble frequently, they're easily frightened and confused and followers on the whole and will even follow other sheep off the top of a cliff in a panic, they're defenceless and

dependent with no natural defences of their own, and they're always on a mission to find greener pastures – now I wonder why the bible would compare us to sheep so often!

But I don't think God compares us to sheep to put us down. He simply makes the human sheep comparison because we, like sheep, desperately need a shepherd – we need someone to lead us and someone to protect us.

The fact is that we have an inborn need for a shepherd. Isaiah 53:6 says 'we all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way'..... or Mark 9:36 'When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd'. And those who understand this need know that more than just any shepherd, because there are many who would seek to lead us astray, we need The true Shepherd.

Nowhere is the love and care of the true shepherd and the relationship he wants to have with his sheep more beautifully illustrated than in the 23rd Psalm. For generations, people have recited and sung its beloved and well known words and for good reason! In his book Travelling Light, Max Lucado says that if we were to truly live by the advise of the psalm, our

human burdens would be entirely diminished. So I thought I'd spend some time this morning personalising that for me.

I confess that I've worshipped lots of small gods in my life. The gods of success and workaholism are probably the worst. But David reminds me that The Lord, not just any god, not a small god, but Yahweh, THE LORD is my shepherd and therefore I want for nothing. It's aspirational as well as inspirational for me— that I will learn to trust in the unchanging and unshakable God, a God who is not going anywhere, for all my needs. We live in a world of constant change – relationships change, our health changes, our financial circumstances change – but the God who made this world is the same one who rules it today, the same one who wants to be my shepherd – same plan, same conviction, same character, same love, same grace. I am fickle but he is not – he never changes. I turn away but he does not. I shut my ears and avert my eyes but he does not.

And David tells us this wonderful secret that he has discovered— because the Lord is our shepherd, and we are his sheep, I need not want for anything. The things I surround myself with; my ministry, my home, the clothes I wear and the car I drive don't make me who I am – who I am is defined by who I am in Christ.

He makes me lie down in green pastures and he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul – I don't know about you but I finish each day exhausted. Come evening I'm longing for sleep and when the alarm goes off in the morning I often still feel weary. But I'm beginning to realise that it's not more sleep I need – it's more rest and the only way to get more rest is to allow my Shepherd to lead me and to be in charge – only then can he take the weariness from me. I need to make a monumental shift and allow God to be in control so that he can bring rest to my mind, my body and most importantly to my soul.

And as he leads me, I need to remember that even though he won't give me all the answers for tomorrow's problems, I'm confident (mostly!) that I can trust him with today's.

Our car GPS has revolutionised my life – and quite possibly saved our marriage! What a relief that it's no longer my responsibility to read the damn map and give directions. What a relief that it now much less likely that we will get hopelessly lost and that a calm, measured voice will offer help and directions.

What a relief that I don't have to experience the feeling of complete hopelessness when I am lost or overwhelmed by my circumstances! With

God as our Shepherd I can lift our eyes and catch a glimpse of the future that he has promised and know that he will stay with me in the meantime. He doesn't necessarily change the circumstances that have made me feel so lost but he restores my hope and promises to carry me through whatever it is that comes my way.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. In a room with as many people as this, I know I don't have a monopoly on harbouring guilt and shame but I am painfully aware of my shortcomings. God has captured the market in righteousness – it's what he is and what I'm not; yet it's what he requires.

So he leads me in paths of righteousness – right up a long windy track that takes me to the top of a steep hill called Golgotha. At the top of the hill is a cross and he invites me to leave my burden of guilt and shame there and never pick them up again. I am made righteousness in him.

Even though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff comfort me.

When David wrote these words he may well have been referring only to physical death but for me his words have far wider implications. I will

walk through many valleys in this lifetime and sadly, some I have chosen to walk alone. Sometimes I was stubborn, sometimes I was, quite frankly, stupid, and there was a time when I simply didn't know any better. Now I do. What ever it is that is facing you today, you don't have to face it alone. Problems with your marriage?– God is with you. Problems with your kids – God is with you. Problems with your health – God is with you. Financial difficulties – God is with you. Addiction, depression, grief or loneliness – God is with you. And yes – are you facing the valley of the shadow of death – God is with you too. It's with complete sincerity that I say, that I pray, that no one here will walk through a valley ever again without knowing that God is at your side – and I ask that you pray that for me too!

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Many of my happiest memories centre around my table with family and friends gathered for a feast. How much more pleasure does it bring God to prepare a table for us – not just for us to eat and drink of the bread and wine and to leave – but to actually take him to ourselves. He sets a permanent place for us at his table every day and we are honoured guests. Sometimes we forget the promise and the abundance of his provision and we wander away to try our luck elsewhere but God never clears our place away and he mourns the time it is empty – always ready to set a

magnificent meal before us should we decide to return. And if you haven't eaten at your Father's table lately I hope you will today....

You anoint my head with oil. In ancient Israel shepherds rubbed oil on their sheep for 3 reasons – to repel insects, to prevent injury and to treat wounds. Just like sheep, we too suffer wounds from everyday living.

Mostly they're not of the physical variety but of the heart. They don't have to be particularly deep to hurt – I'm thinking of the pain caused by the smallest paper cuts – the disappointment I feel when a conversation with my teenager doesn't go well again, the hurt of being let down by a friend, regretting the way I handled a particular situation yesterday. But some of my wounds are much deeper and far harder to express....and just as Jesus touched the blind man and the leper to bring healing, I do believe he wants to touch mine still today. I wish I could tell you he'll take them away but often I know he won't but I cling to his promise to tend to me, just as the shepherd tends to his sheep.

My cup overflows. The overflowing cup was a powerful symbol in David's day. Hosts used it to send a message to their guests – as long as the cup was keep full, the guest knew he was welcome. When the cup was empty and not refilled, the guest knew it was time to leave. Not much has changed in our social graces has it? But in the ancient Middle East, if the host wanted

to make an honoured guest feel particularly welcome he filled the cup to overflowing and wine would run over and down the sides of the goblet.

David understood that God had filled his cup to overflowing and was quick to acknowledge it. I don't know about you but I sometimes I tend to notice what I don't have more than I notice what I do.

Well over a century ago F.B. Meyer said this:

Whatever the blessing is in our cup, it is sure to run over. With him the calf is always the fatted calf, the robe is always the best robe; the joy is unspeakable; the peace passeth understanding...there is no grudging in God's benevolence; he does not measure out his goodness as a apothecary counts his drops and measure his drams, slowly and exactly, drop by drop. God's way is characterized by multitudinous and overflowing bounty.

The last thing we need worry about is having enough. In Christ, our cup truly does overflow.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. I've learnt that there is only one surely in life and that is God. When we put our faith in anything or anyone less we are bound to be disappointed.

Goodness to provide and mercy to forgive comes from only one place and from only one person – he is the only certainty in this life and the next.

I've often shared with you the story of my growing up years. I'm not going to bore you again with that but suffice to say, I was badly homesick for a home and a family that no longer existed. In those days I often felt dreadfully alone and far from home – not even sure where home was anymore and I made lost of mistakes in trying to find it. Jesus rescued me when I was at my very lowest and slowly he's made me realise that even though this journey called life is a precious gift, it's not my destination and I will never be truly home here. Whatever I am blessed with in this life, whatever burdens I will carry here, they are only transitory.

But I know that some of you are carrying much greater burdens than I ever have, and I'm not making light of those. I simply know that God, the good shepherd, wants to be with you. He wants to shelter and protect you, tend and care for you, guide and even carry you when it's necessary. He wants to build a relationship with you that is profoundly deep and intimate – not just a Sunday morning for an hour relationship – but one that provides your very purpose in living every moment of your life.

For the sake of that – for your sake and for my sake he was prepared to die – and he did it willingly. In reality, no-one forced him to the cross – he wasn't a victim of human conspiracies and he wasn't a martyr whose life ended in tragedy. He obediently participated in God's plan and his sacrificial act pointed to the saving work of God. He went to the cross murmuring my name and your name, and the names of people outside of here who have never even heard of or acknowledged his!

But each of us has a choice – he can merely be the good shepherd or he can be my good shepherd. The promises of the 23rd psalm don't exist without getting the first bit settled – prior to us doing that, it's all academic really! David didn't say the lord is the shepherd – he said the lord is MY shepherd. Jesus can't be, won't be, your shepherd until you make him your lord. Will you pray with me please.

Gracious God,

I stand amazed that Jesus loves me and willingly gave his life for me – it simply takes my breath away.

And Lord, just as you have led me in your paths of righteousness to the foot of the cross, I know you have done that for every person here – each of us simply needs to follow. Give us the courage to do that; to step out from behind our small gods and all that holds us back – doubt, confusion, shame

and guilt, distress, addictions, grief, and all the things of this world that seem important – sweep it all before you Lord and let nothing stand in the way of our following you.

In Jesus name I pray. Amen.