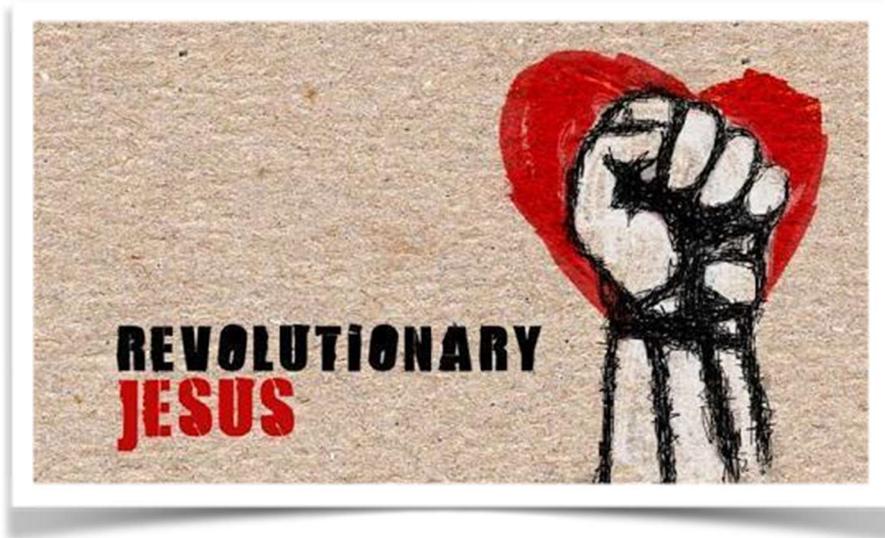
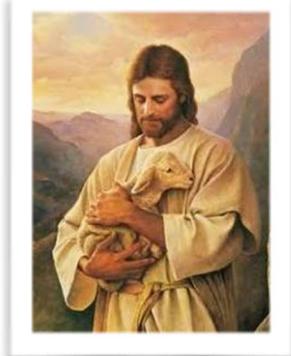


Jesus said, “I am the Wild shepherd”



When you think about Jesus as a shepherd this is what comes to mind, right? Gentle Jesus with a docile lamb nestled in his arms or around his shoulders? The nurturing shepherd, protecting his sheep, loving them one and all?



These pictures are everywhere, painted on canvas, etched in stained glass, assembled in mosaics. They are the most popular and enduring images of Jesus and justifiably so. But when Jesus referred to himself as the good shepherd is this only what he had in mind?

Images of Jesus with a single pathetic lamb owe more to a parable he told in Matthew 18 and Luke 15 about a shepherd leaving his ninety-nine safe sheep to rescue a single lost one. He told the story to explain to the Pharisees why he hung out with “sinners” (a thing the Pharisees clearly frowned on).

But the passage in which he described himself as the good shepherd is John 10.

In that passage he’s also tangling with the Pharisees. They have just subjected a poor beggar blind from birth, who had been miraculously healed by Jesus, to nothing short of spiritual abuse. They brutally haul him and his

family through various theological panels demanding he explain who Jesus is and where his power comes from.

The man is illiterate, uneducated, unsophisticated. In his ignorance he can only say what he knows. He was once blind and now can see. Jesus is incensed by the Pharisees' bullying methods and says so. When they retaliate he unloads on them, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains" (Jn9:41).

In other words, they are blind ones, not the beggar.

But Jesus isn't finished. He continues with his attack on the legalistic and stultifying religion of the Pharisees. The people of Israel are like sheep and I am the shepherd for which they are yearning, he says.

They are done with the burdensome yoke of fundamentalism the Pharisees have placed on them. Israel has been locked inside a pen and they are desperate to hear the true shepherd's voice.

***"The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."* (Jn 10:3-5)**

Get that?

Jesus isn't saying he will keep the sheep safe in their pen. He's saying he leads them out. To freedom. To roam the lush green hills. To have life, and have it to the full. (Jn 10:10)

The Pharisees have locked Israel inside a pen of controlling legalism. The sheep are trapped, unable to flourish. Israel won't follow their voices, because they are like strangers. Jesus voice rings true. They hear his message of freedom and their ears prick up. They want to be free.

Indeed, Jesus goes further and says, ***"I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd"* (Jn 10:16)**

Jesus has come to set Israel free from the legalistic, fear-based, bad religion of the Pharisees and to lead them into a multinational, multiethnic, redeemed society drawn from every nation and tongue.

In this context, Jesus' statement, "I am the good shepherd", isn't a message of nurture and protection. It's a declaration of revolution!

Pastors have embraced the shepherd metaphor to describe their work of providing pastoral oversight for a congregation. And often when I hear them speaking about "shepherding the flock" I hear overtones of nurture, protection, and, dare I say it, control?

But all that anxious, controlling religion only leads to deathly rule-keeping and bland homogeneity.

When we speak about Jesus setting the captives free, remember one of the things we need to be freed from is bad religion.

If we're to lead our congregations like the Good Shepherd himself, surely our job is to lead people to freedom, to get them out of the restricting pen of anxious religion.

Good shepherds know that the church should comprise people from a variety of backgrounds, different ethnicities, and diverse experiences. The best pastoral leadership is the kind that equips us for the radical, unlikely, rarely experienced society Jesus came to inaugurate.

Good shepherding equips the flock to live large, generous, hospitable lives, devoted to Jesus, unthreatened by difference, open to the other, ready to serve. And to be all that we need all the help we can get.

by Michael Frost