

2/8/15

Exhort: Tending the flock

Reading: Jeremiah 23: 1 - 6

Once more then brethren and sisters, we find our selves gathered together around these emblems of our Heavenly Father's love. Once more we are reminded of the Love of our God, shown too us through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now the opening verses (1-2) in our Jeremiah reading firstly contain a warning that the prophet levelled against the rulers within the nation, within the ecclesia of his day. Equally our own generation brethren must heed this cautionary wake up call.

Jeremiah 23 and verses 1 – 4

“Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith Yahweh. Therefore thus saith Yahweh God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, saith Yahweh. And I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries whither I have driven them, and will bring them again to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase. And I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith Yahweh”.

But this salutary admonition is followed by a promise (verses 3-4) that our God, the original shepherd will recover the sheep, even Israel here. He will restore them to their land, to full health and to spiritual fruitfulness. In verse four the means of that rehabilitation and reformation is through faithful under shepherds and these conscientious and obedient shepherds will feed the flock of God acceptably.

Contrast now Jeremiah 2 and verse 8

“The priests said not, Where is Yahweh? and they that handle the law knew me not: the pastors (shepherds) also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal, and walked after things that do not profit”.

The entire leadership of the nation had rejected our Heavenly Father. They had revolted against the law of our God. They had sought more convenient, pleasurable idols to worship and they followed after worldly gain, after things that do not profit, say's our Heavenly Father through Jeremiah and the sheep were led astray.

Jeremiah 10 and verse 21

*“For the pastors (shepherds) are become **brutish**, and have not sought Yahweh: therefore they shall not prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered”.*

Here we learn that the shepherds are “*brutish*” or slow and dull hearted to the things of God. Their hearts are far far from our Heavenly Father, as Isaiah prophesied, “*Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me*”. As a result the flock of God in the prophet’s day was weak, sick, broken, scattered and destroyed.

What of us brethren and sisters as we attend this table of remembrance today? Is it our practice?

- *To ask where is Yahweh?*
- *Are we still able to handle, to wield and use skilfully the law of our God to speak into our daily lives?*
- *Or are we given in rebellion to our secret transgressions?*
- *Are we quietly behind closed doors seeking out the idols of our hearts?*
- *Are we walking after gain, seeking things with no eternal profit?*
- *Have we become brutish, slow and dull hearted to hear the word of God?*
- *Is our hearts far removed from our Heavenly Father, although we still pay lip service with our attendance at the meeting?*
- *Have we begun to seek less and less our God less in prayer?*

So let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup?

Now in positive contrast we read earlier in Jeremiah three the first prophesy of consolation within the book:

Turn with me to Jeremiah 3 and verse 15

“I will give you pastors (shepherds) according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding”.

Here brethren and sisters then is some definitive exhortation for us all to follow and to emulate. For regardless of our position and gender status within the ecclesia today. Because we are all shepherds in training, being prepared by our lives now to be kings and priests of that glorious age to come. These words apply to us all.

For our association one with another in ecclesial life calls us upon all through that fellowship to tend to one another’s spiritual and physical needs.

Although the key sense is with regards to teaching, it is not exclusively limited to that activity, but by amplification includes the provision of loving care.

That teaching and that care was extended through the imparting and modelling of “*knowledge and understanding*”. That word “*knowledge*” is used exclusively for the knowledge only God has - in other words to us - the revealed word of God. Whereas “*understanding*” here is speaking of **wisdom, insight and discretion**, even the ability to apply that knowledge of God in the circumstances of daily life.

Brethren and sisters don't we all need more of that? Don't we all need to spend time in the word of life daily? Imbibing the knowledge contained therein and sucking out of the marrow of its wisdom, insight and discretion through meditating upon those life-giving words.

Now keeping in this fifteenth verse of chapter three, we read two things about these shepherds. Firstly the Hebrew here (*for shepherd*) indicates that these shepherds are principled and it is their habitual behaviour and practice to instruct and to care for others. Then secondly we are immediately informed that they shall feed and tend the flock according to our Heavenly Father's heart.

Surely this must be the significant motivation and the high standard of every devoted saints honourable service. Such exemplary qualities are not to be limited to a handful of people given responsibility? *Brethren and sisters is this our instinctive practice in imparting care one to another, whether formally or informally? Do we each have this same desire to faithfully nourish and nurture our brethren and sisters in Christ?*

Indeed brethren and sisters, *where is our heart in this matter? Are we really following the heart of God in this?* Only in self-examination are we each able to answer for our selves this penetrating question?

Let us each one recall we have come to remember the good, the chief, even the great shepherd of the sheep, who through his own blood. Even the blood of the everlasting covenant gave his life for the sheep according to the heart of our heavenly Father!

So brother, sister what is the state of our heart in the light of our beloved Master's supreme example, emphasised for us by the emblems before us?

Concerning him, do we not read elsewhere:

* Give our lives, in time, in energy, in effort, in resources, in love, spending and being spent.

1st John 3 and verses 16 – 19

“Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him”

True shepherds give their lives* in their care for the sheep. Of these shepherds we read back in our chapter today, - **twenty-three and the fourth verse**:

“And I will set up shepherds over them, which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith Yahweh”.

Notice carefully brethren and sisters there are three practical outcomes from being properly spiritually fed and lovingly cared for in ecclesial life:

- The sheep no longer **fear**
- The sheep are not **dismayed**
- The sheep are not **lacking**

* Following the Apostles example: For I have not shunned declaring unto you all the full counsel of God. I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear, either publicly or privately in your homes.

These are the direct results of every brother and sister ministering the word into the lives of the sheep both formally and informally, as they have opportunity or see the need*. This is not just the role of elders or of brethren in formal teaching situations.

These faithful brethren and sisters are like David, the great ancestor of our lord, who our Heavenly Father raised up, of whom this testimony is recorded. *“I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfil all my will”.*

*These end verses of the psalm are the only faithful human example in this long sad psalm.

Psalm 78 and verses 70 – 72*

*“He chose David also his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds: From following the ewes great with young he brought him to feed Jacob his people, and Israel his inheritance. **So he fed them according to the integrity of his heart; and guided them by the skilfulness of his hands”.***

Notice the centrality of David’s heart in his work caring for not only natural sheep, but also more importantly later for Yahweh’s people Israel. That word *“integrity”* speaks of a moral pureness and a singleness of purpose that David modelled, as a type of our beloved Master.

Two sayings of the Master from Luke's Gospel come to mind with regard to what is recorded of David here in this psalm. "*He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own?*" But David like our Lord, his greater son had indeed been faithful, so from looking after his father Jesse's sheep, he was given a kingdom of his own*.

* Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

Indeed what of us brethren and sisters, *have we been faithful in that, which is least?* Look too the emblems before us upon the table, as you consider that thought?

So the psalm continues that David led the people "*by the skilfulness of his hands*", which refers to that **understanding, that wisdom, that insight and discretion** he gained from his knowledge of the word. So David, as our Lord, were living examples of what our Heavenly Father desires of all those in Christ, especially those who have a duty of care within the ecclesia.

Turning back, once more to Jeremiah chapter twenty-three and verse four, where we read, "*I will set up shepherds over them, which shall feed them: and **they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking**, saith Yahweh*".

Let us recall these three practical outcomes from being properly spiritually fed and lovingly cared for in ecclesial life:

- The sheep no longer **fear**
- The sheep are not **dismayed**
- The sheep are not **lacking**

Now sheep are known to be fretful creatures that can be easily paralysed by fear. We likewise, brethren and sisters also suffer with many different fears*.

- Worries about our children or grandchildren
- Fear of losing a job
- Anxiety over our health
- Concerns in the meeting
- Relationship angst
- Financial jitters
- Retirement fretfulness

* Which of us brethren and sisters are not sitting here this morning without some form of anxiety, if we are totally honest?

Such apprehensions are if dwelt upon amounts to idolatry. Because God is not in focus and not trusted, as he should be, the fear reveals that God is not truly sovereign.

These inappropriate fears then reveal the gap in our understanding with our hearts and minds, between our faith on one hand and our current reality on the other.

Matthew 6 and verses 27, 33 – 34

“Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof”.

But as this fourth verse indicates to us fear is not the only problem with the sheep, who are not fed or cared for - after our Heavenly Father’s own heart. For we read on *“I will set up shepherds over them, which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, **nor be dismayed**, neither shall they be lacking, saith Yahweh”.*

That word translated *“dismayed”*, here carries the sense of being either discouraged or broken, crippled. This is a much stronger word than the earlier one *“fear”*, dismayed speaks of being fainthearted, small souled and timid in life and faith.

1st Thessalonians 5 and verse 14

“Now we exhort you, brethren, comfort the feebleminded”.

These brethren and sisters, these sheep, need constantly comforted and encouraged. They need other sheep to come alongside them purposely to calm, to console, to strengthen, and to give them an incentive to carry on. This takes time and effort to develop real relationships with these brethren and sisters, it’s not something you can do in passing on a Sunday morning or for a few minutes on a weeknight Bible class.

That word *“comfort”* (*1st Thessalonians 5:14*) in the Greek is an ongoing command, but it is in what is called the middle voice. Indicating to us that it requires from each one of us a choice to perform it and an acknowledgement that it is a responsibility we must accept in Christ.

* I suspect that there maybe 1 or 2 in an ecclesia this size?

I have no knowledge if there is anybody here today that is currently injured or discouraged in faith? As we read here in Jeremiah, *do we even know one another well enough to know who such brethren and sisters are?** For you should know your ecclesia, as I should know mine? Who will then step up to the crease and accept the responsibility to come alongside and minister to those that maybe in need this way?

Isn't this exactly what it means to lay down our lives for the brethren, the sheep? Do we not read of the master, "*the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many*"!

Turning back, for a final time to Jeremiah chapter twenty-three and verse four, where we read, "*I will set up shepherds over them, which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith Yahweh*".

Now this third category in this fourth verse, seems a little obscure in the King James translation. Both Rotherham and the NET Bible give the sense that none of the sheep will be missing from the ecclesia? There will be none lacking, wanting or even lost.

All will be present - none will be missing all will be accounted for. If the ecclesial members the other sheep and those in responsibility over them the shepherds care, tend and instruct the flock, after God's own heart. After the example of our Lord, whom we shall shortly remember!

For did our Lord not say, "*a new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another*".

Matthew 18 and verses 11 - 14

"For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost. How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish".

How many can you name brethren and sisters who in your time in the truth have fallen by the wayside or been driven out of the truth and are lost?

Like the ecclesia of Jeremiah' day, we too in the main have failed in our duties and responsibilities. The sad fact of life is brethren and sisters; fears and anxieties often dominate our lives. As a community we are increasingly finding it difficult to deal with those that are dismayed, because of the nature and pace of modern life. Never mind the utter failure of our body in general to minister in any substantial way to those sheep those who are missing or sadly lost.

1st Peter 5 and verses 2 – 4

“Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away”.

We are exhorted here not to serve forcefully seeking to control everything that happens for our benefit, as did that evil shepherd Diotrephes, who loved to have the pre-eminence. For although this passage does exhort specifically elders and shepherds, yet, just as in Jeremiah the general principles apply to us all brethren and sisters in ecclesial life.

Colossians 1 and verses 18 - 20

“And he is the head of the body, the ecclesia: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; And, having made peace through the blood of his stake, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven”.

Rather brethren and sisters, we are all called upon to be humble ensamples to one another. We are all called upon to serve willingly in whatever capacity we can and volunteer too in the ecclesia. We are all called upon to carry out that service with a ready mind, which is with an eagerness and promptness to perform the work for the Lord. For surely in the light of that which we are to remember in a few moments, this is our reasonable service and worship.

Returning to Jeremiah 23 and verses 4 – 6

“And I will set up shepherds over them, which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith Yahweh. Behold, the days come, saith Yahweh, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgement and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, Yahweh OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS”.

This of course is a prophecy of consolation concerning the age to come, when Israel will be delivered and fully restored to our Heavenly Father. But in the mercy of the Father it will be us, brethren and sisters, which fulfil this wonderful prophecy! So it is incumbent upon us to endeavour to apply ourselves to our shepherding training now, after the example of the good shepherd.

So as we come to break bread and to drink wine brethren and sisters. Let us see in this bread the word of life modelled in our Master, which provides for us a fleshed out example of how to apply the word in our own and our brethren's daily lives.

Likewise in the wine let us understand the example of the great shepherd of the sheep, who through his blood, even the blood of the everlasting covenant has enabled the God of peace.

“To make us perfect in every good (shepherding) work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen”.