

2ND August 2020 : Prophets – Ezekiel 34: Caring shepherd

Continue series on the prophets. Carl looked at Ezekiel last week eating a scroll! Israel is rebellious and Israel's leaders are rebellious but as we will see – God will step in.

This week should be New Wine summer conference. It has been cancelled due to Covid 19. It has been influential for me for 14 years. IN 2006 we went for the first time. First time camping and first time to a Christian conference so seemed a bit risky. But it was great and has influenced and supported me over the last 14 years. This year it is online and can be found on the web page for our services this week.

New Wine DNA is about operating in the power of the Spirit and equipping all believers. The key principle in recent years has been that it is not just about the two weeks in the summer but about taking it home to churches for the other 50 weeks of the year.

Turning to our passage today, I listened to a sermon on this passage from a US church. The preacher suggested that before the mercy seat church leaders will be asked one question “How well did you look after my flock?” This is a terrifying question because we always think that there is more that we could have done and there are myriad ways to let people down! Ezekiel gives a bench mark for shepherding.

We may think about Peter's commission on the beach we see in John 21. Jesus asks him 3 times if he loves him, then gives him three tasks (that he passed on to the church), feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, feed my sheep. That can be physical food but its also spiritual food, bread, word and Spirit.

Sheep are notoriously daft. Need care. For example, a sheep's wool keeps on growing. I came across a picture of one that got lost and its wool was so deep that you could barely see its face. Sheep also, famously, cannot get up if they land on their backs! They need care.

I came across an example of what a shepherd is not. It's a role description for a tour guide (Shepherd) at Canterbury Cathedral. There are a few “herding” tasks but also an emphasis on getting tourist to buy guidebooks (mentioned three times!)

Ezekiel was told to prophesy against the shepherds – chilling words about leaders and pastors, where God's word is against you. The message – don't just look after yourself, look after others.

Jesus gave a similar warning in his day in Luke 20, about the leaders who walk around in flowing robes devouring widows' houses. Our own Bishops and Archdeacons walk around in flowing robes but are the opposite of what Jesus was talking about – they are passionate about mission sharing the Gospel, concern for the poor and maintaining a diverse community.

A good example perhaps of what Ezekiel was talking about is Jesse Duplantis, a US TV evangelist, who was recently asking for people to fund his FOURTH private jet.

Ezekiel's prophecy is also about the safety of the flock. Physical safety and spiritual safety. 1 Peter talks about the devil as a lion prowling around seeking people to devour. It is no surprise that Psalm 23 talks about the Lord as the shepherd with a staff, like a crook, to get the sheep out of trouble and a rod, a big club like stick, to fend off wild animals.

God says that he is against the shepherds, will remove the shepherds and will rescue Israel. God himself will search for the lost, bind up the wounded, strengthen and be a shepherd. Just as Jesus promised in John 10 – I am the good shepherd.

God will also Judge – just as in Matthew 25 people will be judged by how they have looked after others as if they were looking after Jesus himself. And they will be judged and separated as sheep and goats.

God makes several promises through Ezekiel's words – I will judge, save, shepherd, make Israel a blessing, give land and water it. Its important to note that this is not just for Israel's benefit but to make them a blessing for other nations.

For their part Israel will know God, be safe, will eat and know his presence. The passage ends "You are the sheep of my pasture and I am your God". John 10 again – "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me".

By now we may look at the shepherds of Israel and think that they brought it on themselves. We even be a bit judgemental of them. But we might cast our eyes to Romans 1 and 2. Romans 1 closes with a litany of sins and faults that "they" commit. But v1 of chapter 2 says this "You have no excuse, who pass judgement, for you do the same things, judge others and you condemn yourself"

If we go back to Peter's commission. I love you 3 times. Three commissions. Peter himself took on the role of shepherd and then declared in his first letter – you are a holy nation, a royal priesthood – we extend this to the idea of a priesthood of all believers. Paul spoke about the body of Christ and all parts working together to build up the church.

Jesus didn't care for everyone, heal everyone, protects everyone. He spent most of his time with a small group of people who he trained and equipped to be leaders who made others leaders. Shepherds who made other shepherds. He delegated!

If he is shepherding the flock himself it is by his Holy Spirit in the believers and by the church caring for the others in the church.

So back to the question at the beginning. Maybe, instead of being a question just for leaders, a gift which Paul says should be exercised diligently. Maybe that question "What have you done to feed, care for and shepherd the flock" is directed at everyone.

To close, back to New Wine. The principle of "taking it home" is that anyone who goes to the conference that received a blessing through teaching or ministry or word can give it away and bless others. You don't need to go to a conference for that to happen. God blesses us all the time. If you know that you have been blessed – give it away. To feed, care for and protect the flock. It may be a word of encouragement, a scripture, a sense of hope, a good news story or a testimony. Give it away so that others will be blessed.

Together we will be able to answer the question "what did you do" with "Lord, what you asked of me".

Amen.