

SERMON: 26 March 2017 – Rev Dr Brenda Robson

“He calls His own sheep by name”

Psalm 23

John 10:1-18

The 23rd Psalm is perhaps the best known scripture in the Bible.

Why the 23rd Psalm? It is only 6 short verses. There are 149 other psalms and 65 other books in the bible.

Perhaps it is because this psalm so completely describes our loving relationship with a caring God.

It is the psalmist at his most positive, calm and joyful and confident, taking strength from the shepherd who guides and protects and sustains him.

It is a psalm of comfort which is the reason I read it at a funeral service on Friday and will read it again on Tuesday.

It is a psalm that Jesus knew well and an image that Jesus took to himself.

It is a psalm for lent in the approach to Easter.

John 10-11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his for the sheep.

14 I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me

We have a picture of the modern day shepherd in our country rounding up his flock with sheepdogs running around or the shepherd sitting on a quad bike and coming along behind them. Like Jesus the good shepherd, he or she cares for the sheep, feeds them, shelters them, nurtures them, treats their wounds.

But the shepherd in Jesus' day had another dimension – he led the sheep from the front. When he took them from the pen in the morning to go to pastures new, green pastures beside quiet waters, he walked ahead of them and called them. They knew the shepherd and would follow him. And so Jesus' words in verses 2 to 6.

Notice there are other sheep there who don't know him and don't follow him out, they are not his - yet.

There are three calls that Jesus is making today to people who listen to or read this message.

Firstly, Jesus is calling those who are still in the sheep pen, who haven't responded to the master's voice. He is calling you now to come out through the gate and follow him. Coming through that gate is easy – you simply need to say to Jesus that you believe in him and want to follow him, you confess your sins to him and receive his forgiveness, you ask Jesus into your life and give your life to him.

Perhaps that will lead to you seeking to be baptised by the holy spirit. If you were baptised in the past then it might lead to you making a public declaration of faith and becoming a member of the church as Martin is doing this morning.

Jesus calls the one sheep in 100 who went astray. Could that be you today?

Secondly, Jesus might be calling you into something new. Perhaps there is a new role within the church that you feel you might offer to fill. It might mean stepping out of your comfort zone and testing the water. Perhaps there is something you feel called to do outwith the church, a service to be rendered, people who need your help or advice or support.

Thirdly, I believe that God has a specific call for someone in our church today, a call to ministry in the Church of Scotland, ministry in the broadest sense. Maybe there is more than one person which would be even more exciting! I have never before felt led by God to make this declaration during a service but I believe that God wants it declared today.

As I was contemplating this, I received a letter from 121 George Street, the church headquarters, advising that there will be a Vocations Conference in the Carnegie Conference Centre in Dunfermline on June 17th this year. The letter said that the Church had had a dream since 2014 of doubling the number of ministers in training to about 30 each year and they achieved this last year.

It went on to say **“We're both thankful and ambitious, determined to build on that success and to find more Church members who may be inspired by those who have already said ‘Is it me, Lord?’ and willing to ask that question of themselves. By helping us to commend the Vocations Conference, the vital and immensely useful first step for everyone sensing a calling, you can begin to ask your members ‘Is it you?’, and maybe you'll have the thrill of hearing someone answer ‘Well, maybe...’ It would be a great boost to the work we do within the Ministries Council, and a wonderful gift to the Church's ministry. Please help us to convey our enthusiasm for the growth we're beginning to see!”**

I took the timing of the letter to be confirmation from God that this would be the message today.

It might be a call to full time ministry of Word and Sacrament, it might be a call to Ordained Local Ministry (the role I have in the church), it might be a call to the

diaconate or readership or youth worker or parish assistant or one of the many posts operated by the church.

Does this declaration cause anything to stir within you?

How do you discern what God is calling you to?

I have shared with some of you a few years back my own call to ministry and I want to mention it again today as an encouragement and an example of how God can work.

God called me to ministry through his word at very specific times and in specific verses. It was not a call I had expected. It was not something I had even vaguely contemplated. And at the time it was not something I wanted. I was in my mid forties with four teenage sons and a full time job.

I had been active in various churches since becoming a Christian in my early twenties. I had taken Sunday School at all ages from 3 upwards, I had led youth church and youth clubs, helped to lead house groups and a large women's fellowship, served on the board and session, even been church treasurer for three years.

I felt I had been involved and was doing my bit. Then God called my name and led me out, out of my comfort zone, out of the activities I had been doing, eventually out of my church where I had been happy and comfortable for 14 years.

It was on a weekend away at Carberry with 30 women from my church that I experienced the call of God on my life. I was leading our Saturday evening worship time and heard God clearly say "This is what I want you to do." And I said that's fine, I'm doing this, I'm happy doing it every year when our women's group goes away. But God said "This **is** what I want you to do!" and I knew he meant more. I knew in that moment that he was calling me to ministry. And I felt over-whelmed, upset, angry, fearful. I did not want it. The next morning during Sunday worship I could not sing "Make me a channel of your peace" because I was in turmoil and I went home in bits.

I told Michael that over the weekend God had called me to ministry and to his credit he did not once question it or suggest I shouldn't do it. He came from a long line of Church of Scotland ministers although he had not expected to be married to one! I was the one who spent a year struggling with it, arguing with God and refusing to move forward.

I decided to read the bible right through, Matthew to Revelation and then Genesis to Malachi. At very specific moments I just happened to be at very specific chapters.

I had not told my minister about feeling called to ministry but in the summer of

2000 he handed me a poster advertising an Enquirers Conference for those interested in working for the church in some form of ministry or service.

I went to the two day Enquirers' Conference in September 2000 in Glasgow. In my reading through the bible I had reached the end of Deuteronomy and in my hotel room half an hour before the conference started I opened my bible at Joshua 1 and read

6 Be strong and courageous. Because you will lead these people to the land I swore to their forefathers to give them....be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified, do not be discouraged for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go....16 Then they answered Joshua and said "Whatever you have commanded us we will do and wherever you send us we will go.

I was startled and amazed by that word going into the conference but this became a pattern over the coming months.

I went to our womens' Weekend Conference at Carberry again in November 2000. During the first session on Friday evening we had to write on a board what we hoped to get from the weekend and I wrote that I wanted God to affirm this call that I was feeling. That night I opened my bible at my bookmark, I had reached Isaiah –

Isaiah 6 : 8

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us? And I said "Here I am. Send me!" He said "Go and tell this people"

I moved the process forward and asked to go on an Enquirer's placement, six months spent in a church to explore call to ministry. I was placed at Stockbridge where the minister was Anne Logan, Mr. Mechie's daughter, an interesting connection to here. On my final Sunday she allowed me to conduct the service and asked me to preach from the lectionary reading - John 21:15 - Jesus reinstates Peter.

Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, Son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes Lord," he said "you know that I love you." Jesus said "Feed my lambs....take care of my sheep"

Anne said to me afterwards "You know God is calling you to ministry and I know he is calling you."

The following month I attended a three day Selection Conference in St Andrews. When I arrived, I had nearly finished my marathon read through the bible and I was in Zechariah. I opened my bible at my bookmark at Zechariah 3:6 and read

The angel of the Lord gave this charge to Joshua : This is what the Lord Almighty says "If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts and I will give you a place amongst these

standing here.”

I went through that selection conference with the absolute certainty and confidence that God was calling.

If God has a plan for you, if he places a call on your life, he will not let go until you test that call and push open the door. You can try to ignore it or argue against it or run away from it like Jonah on the way to Nineveh – but God will eventually catch up with you. He will fling open the doors he want you to go through, he will equip you for whatever tasks he puts before you.

I will finish with a quote from John Powell which you can find on the first page of a book entitled Called or Collared – An Alternative Approach to Vocation by Francis Dewar –

There is an old Christian tradition

That God sends each person into this world

With a special message to deliver

With a special song to sing for others

With a special act of love to bestow

No-one else can speak my message

Or sing my song

Or offer my act of love

These are entrusted only to me.

Until you discover it and offer it, it will be unknown and unexpected. If you do not offer it, it will remain forever unoffered. But if you do respond, whatever the problems or difficulties, you discover that you are doing what you were born for and find in it a profound sense of rightness. You find that peace of God that passes all understanding.

Is it me, Lord? Here I am, Lord!

AMEN