

# Following Jesus and Hearing Voices

*A sermon on John 10:22-30 by Nathan Nettleton, 8 May 2022*

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## Message

We come to be followers of Jesus, not when we believe certain facts about him, but when we hear his voice and follow what it says (even if we don't know where the voice comes from).

## Sermon

Jesus said:

“My sheep hear my voice.  
I know them, and they follow me.  
I give them the life of the world to come,  
and they will never perish.  
No one will snatch them out of my hand.”

It's a funny image: sheep  
Usually we don't like being told that we are sheep  
It's not usually a compliment  
A bunch of clones  
Mindlessly imitating one another  
Following one another this way and that  
Dumb conformity  
It's what all those so-called freedom protesters  
were calling those of us who followed the medical advice  
and got vaccinated.  
“Sheeple” they called us.

But when Jesus calls us “his sheep”, it's different  
Why?  
Because he's identifying himself as the good shepherd  
Being the sheep of the good shepherd  
is instantly attractive  
Why?  
Because the implied alternative  
is being the sheep of the bad shepherds

Whether we are mindless followers  
or mindful followers  
we want to be followers of the good shepherd  
not the bad shepherds

We're just two weeks out from a federal election  
How tempting and easy it would be  
to preach some kind of comparative analysis  
of the various competing bad shepherds

Easy for me, easy for you  
We'd all enjoy it

We love focussing on the faults of bad shepherds  
We go through their Facebook profiles  
We trawl through things they once said somewhere  
We find the hypocrisies, the unenlightened pasts,  
the trails of arrogance, of entitlement,  
of unrecognised privilege, of petty corruption  
We hold them up to ridicule  
We gloat  
And we feel so good

We feel good about being so good  
Because nothing reassures us of our own goodness  
more surely than joining in  
with the exposing and castigating of others  
The worse we can make them look  
the better we appear  
We need someone to measure ourselves against  
and the nastier the chosen comparison point  
the closer to perfection we will seem  
at least in our own eyes.  
So politicians are perfect targets.

But the feel good path  
the easy and tempting electoral season roast  
is not the path that Jesus is calling us to take

“My sheep hear my voice.  
I know them, and they follow me.”

Nothing there about focussing our attention  
on the voices of the bad shepherds  
Nothing about being fascinated by them  
or gaining endless enjoyment  
from studying them closely  
closely enough  
to expose them, ridicule them, castigate them

“My sheep hear my voice.  
I know them, and they follow me.”

If we are to hear that voice  
and learn to follow that voice  
we'll have to give our attention to that voice  
not to the others  
even if it's more fun  
and goes down well with a democracy sausage

But this is not a call to ignore the politicians  
to turn off to the election campaign

to imagine yourself above politics  
Jesus called himself the good shepherd  
in a place and time  
where that image meant “the true king”  
It was an intensely political claim

“My sheep hear my voice.  
They follow me  
Not Caesar.”

But there is no messiah running in the current election  
What are sheep of the good shepherd to do?  
“My sheep hear my voice  
Whoever I might speak through  
my sheep hear my voice.”

Listen carefully for the shepherdly voice  
Don't be taken in  
by those who claim to speak for him  
Many will come claiming to speak in his name  
Don't fall for them

I remember last time round  
there was a Baptist pastor running for the Senate  
He was emailing me regularly  
Asking me to urge you to vote for him  
I read his policy statements  
There was nothing that sounded like Jesus  
More like old fashioned colonialism  
A hankering after the good old days  
of a strong empire  
and the unquestioned reign of European values

I emailed him a question  
I think it was a Jesus-y question  
He wrote back  
but he side-stepped the question  
and just urged me to urge you  
to vote for him  
so that there would be “one of us” in parliament

But parliament doesn't need more of “us”  
at least not because they are “us”  
Parliament does need those  
who hear the voice of the good shepherd  
and follow  
But those who hear the voice and follow  
may not be those wearing good shepherd lapel badges  
and good shepherd bumper stickers

and waving good shepherd flags  
They may not even know where the voice came from  
They just heard a voice  
a voice that rang true  
and they followed it

I wonder if it possible to be a follower of Jesus  
without knowing it  
It seems to follow  
We are called to be people of “the way”  
rather than just badge wearers  
or believers in an idea  
Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice.  
I know them, and they follow me.”  
He says, “I know them”  
not “They know about me”

This is one of the problems with the proposals  
that our Baptist Union is discussing at the moment.  
They are putting up a statement of beliefs  
and saying that we are defined  
by our belief in those things.  
But from the very beginning of the Baptist movement  
we have recognised that that is a failed project.  
The early Baptists saw the Catholics and Lutherans  
killing one another over their statements of belief  
and concluded that that obviously wasn't something  
that helped people to follow the Prince of peace  
and love their enemies.  
They concluded that we would have to define ourselves  
by the way we do things, not by what we say,  
by our actual practice of listening to the shepherd's voice  
and following where it led.

“My sheep hear my voice and follow me”

Sometimes we may not even recognise who the voice comes from.  
We just hear something that sounds true, life-giving,  
and we follow.

Who hasn't had the experience  
of responding to a voice  
without knowing who it came from?  
To varying degrees  
we all hear voices  
all the time

There are voices of conscience  
voices of past memories

voices of vanity or self doubt  
self loathing even  
voices of fear or confidence  
voices that question and criticise  
voices that encourage and motivate

Some of them are so loud and clear  
that they are almost indistinguishable  
from the voices of other people  
Some of them have been carefully manufactured  
and fed to us by vested interests  
through calculated media targeting  
so that they will echo loudly within us  
Others are so subtle  
that we are reluctant to call them voices  
Hunches  
Instincts  
Gut feelings  
Inner promptings

When the prophet Elijah stood on the mountain  
and waited for the voice of the Lord  
there were lots of big loud voices  
an earthquake, a cyclone, a bushfire  
but the voice of the good shepherd  
was not in the big loud voices  
The voice of the good shepherd came to him  
in a whispering sound of sheer silence  
and he covered his face and fell to his knees

To varying degrees  
we all hear voices  
all the time  
Some we dismiss  
Some we ignore  
Some we barely notice  
Some we strain our ears to hear  
in the whispering sound of sheer silence  
Some make our hearts leap  
Some ring true  
Some challenge and inspire  
Some we choose to follow  
perhaps without even being sure why  
It just seems right

“My sheep hear my voice.  
I know them, and they follow me.”

In the multitude of voices  
how do we know  
which is the voice of the good shepherd?  
the voice of the risen one?

The truth is  
that we can seldom know for sure  
but it is something worth practicing  
We're better at it together  
When we discuss what we are hearing  
or feeling  
and listen to one another  
we are more likely to get it right  
"Where two or three gather in my name  
there I am in your midst"  
says the risen one, the good shepherd

But even alone  
we can learn from experience  
and get better at recognising that voice

The voices that spark hope within you  
that open your heart  
and fill you with compassion  
for those you previously regarded with suspicion  
The voices that spark gratitude  
and inspire you to open your hands  
and share the gifts you have received  
The voices that urge you  
to tear down the walls of hostility  
to resist the rush to blame and condemn  
to build bridges of grace and peace  
The voices that encourage you to be merciful  
to others and to yourself  
to know yourself and others beloved  
liberated  
and invited together  
into the life and love of the age to come

These are the voices that are likely  
to be breathed into our hearts and minds  
by the good shepherd  
the risen one  
And as we become more experienced  
at responding to that voice  
and seeing good fruit result  
we learn to trust our judgement  
and recognise it more readily  
and confidently

We also get more practiced  
at recognising the other voices  
the subtly poisonous voices  
the voices that diminish us or others  
the voices that sow seeds of suspicion and division  
the voices that dehumanise others  
and condemn them to hell  
the voices that makes us fearful and tight-fisted  
The voices that tell us  
that everything good  
everything that matters is under threat  
and that it is someone else's fault  
The voices that make us feel hopeless  
defeated, useless, dissatisfied  
The demonic voices

There are those  
who identify with the 'Christian' brand name  
who wear the t-shirts and bumper stickers  
proclaiming their allegiance to the good shepherd  
who nevertheless appear to have become mouthpieces  
for the voices of fear, suspicion, and condemnation

And there are those  
who don't wear the name  
and perhaps identify with other beliefs  
who nevertheless appear  
in word and action  
to be responding to voices  
that lead into wide open spaces  
of love and life and grace

If you see such people on your ballot paper  
vote for them  
If you meet such people  
working for common causes  
partner with them  
If you hear such people  
speaking words of grace and truth  
listen to them

And give thanks  
to them  
and to the good shepherd  
who is giving us life  
whether we know it or not  
the life of the age to come  
the life that is nourished at this table

and wherever the life-giving voice is heard  
Those who hear his voice  
and follow where it leads  
will embrace the life of the world to come  
They are known by the shepherd  
They will never perish  
and no one will ever snatch them  
from the safe and gracious hands  
of the risen one  
the good shepherd