

According to police in Cheshire burglars are continuing to target homes despite the current lockdown.

So, in the space of a week 66 burglaries took place across the county.

But instead of breaking into houses, thieves have adapted by targeting, sheds, garages and outbuildings to steal valuables.

Now it's obvious to say that the burglars have no right to enter these buildings; they're thieves who simply break into their victim's properties for no other reason than to rob them.

Well in that Gospel reading

Jesus says in verse 1 says: Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.

Now the context to this passage is in chapter 9 after Jesus heals a man born blind who is then subsequently thrown out of the synagogue by the Pharisees.

As a result, Jesus describes these religious leaders as thieves and robbers.

You see throughout the Bible, God, who is described as a shepherd, appoints human leaders to care for his sheep.

And it's the responsibility of these shepherd leaders to nurture, care for, and protect God's people.

And that was particularly true for Old Testament Israel.

So, for example in 2 Samuel God says to King David:

"You shall be shepherd of my people Israel."

And in the book of Jeremiah, he says:

"I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding."

And so, these shepherd leaders are called to faithfully lead and guide God's people.

Unfortunately, though that didn't always happen, and a large number of these leaders were corrupt and unfaithful.

As a result, God says he'll send a faithful shepherd to care for his flock; and rescue his people from these impostors.

So, for example Ezekiel 34 say:

‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.

As a result, God says:

I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep.

Well fast forward a few hundred years and we see the Pharisees weighing people down with heavy religious burdens, instead of teaching them about God’s love, grace, and mercy.

So, for example in Mathews Gospel Jesus says:

They preach but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger.

“Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees who have neglected, justice, mercy and faithfulness.”

You hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces and neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.

In other words, Jesus says the Pharisees are false shepherds, they’re thieves and robbers who only take care of themselves.

And we see that as they chuck the blind man out of the synagogue.

In contrast to these religious leaders, Jesus doesn’t throw the blind man out of his presence, he draws him in and restores his sight.

You see Jesus is True Shepherd, the Son of David who God promised way back in Ezekiel who loves, guides and protects his sheep; and who ultimately lays down his life for them.

Well as we continue to struggle with lockdown and all the anxiety and uncertainty we’re having to deal with at the moment, there are a couple of things I want to encourage us with.

Verse 3:

The sheep hears his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him for they know his voice.

In other words, out of all the billions of people around the world Jesus has called you and knows you by name.

In fact, he knows everything about you, your fears, struggles, doubts, and frustrations.

And even when you wander off, he watches over you and forgives you because he loves you as if you were the most precious lamb he possessed.

And at time like this if we're feeling, vulnerable, lonely, or anxious it's good to know that God cares; and that we're safe in Christ.

In fact, Jesus says in verse 28: I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

Secondly no matter what difficulties or dangers we face, Jesus goes before us.

Cardinal Thomas Wolsey once said: Nobody ever got to heaven on a feather mattress.

In other words, life isn't always easy; but Jesus has led the way and walked the path of suffering before us.

So, listen to this:

He's the Shepherd of your souls, he's the one who walks with you through the valley of the shadow of death. The one who leads you by still waters; and his voice speaks words of peace that remind you of His promises.

You see Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who leads the way, through every danger, toil, and snare, as the old hymn puts it.

And how does the verse end: 'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

Thirdly Verse 4 says:

The sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow but flee from him.

Or to put it another way, there are a lot of voices out there that want to lead us astray; and compete for our loyalty and faithfulness to Jesus.

And so, we need to be alert by listening to what God says in the Bible, so that we can avoid any ideas or teaching that sound good; but ultimately lead us away from Jesus.

Verse 27 says: My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

Fourthly the only way to be saved into God's Kingdom is through Jesus.

Because he's the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

And so, using another metaphor:

Jesus says in verse 9: I am the Door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

In other words, Jesus says the only way to be saved; and have our sins forgiven is through him; because he's the only entrance into God's Kingdom.

So, imagine 3 bridges going across a dangerous ravine, 2 are broken and rickety, one is well built and solid.

Which one are you going to use?

Or as one commentator puts it:

To enter through Jesus—to *believe in him*—is the only way to be saved.

And to carry on in a healthy and growing relationship with God, you come in, and go out through Jesus to find pasture. You never move beyond Jesus, or grow out of Jesus, instead he gets bigger and more impressive.

And then fifthly verse 10 says:

The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy. I came that you might have life and have it abundantly.

You see in contrast to these false shepherds who destroy people spiritually by weighing them down with unrealistic demands and religious burdens, Jesus gives life in all its fullness.

Psalm 16 says: In your presence is fulness of joy; at your right hand are pleasure forever more.

Now of course Jesus doesn't promise a pain free life of ease now; but he does promise to his followers, a fulfilling, extravagant life of discipleship that starts now; and goes on forever.

And as someone said: Its' better to live fully, even at great cost, than to never truly live at all.

You see Jesus offers life in all its fullness.

Finally, the term Good Shepherd is actually a regal title.

So, in the Old Testament Shepherds are often described as Kings.

So, when we hear the term Good Shepherd in reference to Jesus what it really means is Good King.

And in contrast to everyone who's come before him, Jesus is the Good King who rules in a loving, and just way.

The Shepherd King who judges wisely, cares for his people, heals his people and protects his people.

And then dies on a cross for his people, so they can have life in all its fullness. Amen!