

EDITORIAL

In Times of Chaos, Jesus is Our Shepherd

Since the beginning of this year, the fragile world-order that has prevailed over the past 80 years (since the end of WWII) has been turned upside down. It's hard not to feel anxious, not just for the nations of the world, but also for the global church. When President Trump announced, after bombing Iran's nuclear facilities at Israel's bidding, "We love you God, and we love our great military," the message was loud and clear. A large proportion of American Evangelicals are heavily implicated in the current tide of US politics, with dangerous consequences for vulnerable minority Christian communities in North Africa, Middle East, and South Asia. When emperors co-opt the language of divine favour to mask their military aggression and economic greed, the church in its euphoria has all too often compromised its prophetic independence and blurred the distinction between God's will on earth and human will to power. The outcome has always been the same. The church has sold its birthright in Christ for a mess of political pottage while the lives of millions of ordinary people on every continent have been plunged into chaos and driven further into the arms of exploitation and extremism. The targeting of reciprocal tariffs against Sri Lanka, a nation struggling to recover from economic collapse, is a demonstration of this blatantly un-Christian model of policymaking. The arrogance of autocrats and the greed of oligarchs only mean one thing – ordinary people (the very people they claim they want to make more secure and prosperous) suffer.

When Jesus walked through the villages and towns of Galilee, he saw the daily struggles of ordinary people all around him. He healed their diseases and drove out evil spirits, but the most life-changing thing he did was to *teach them*. Mark states that "when Jesus landed and saw a large

crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things” (6:34). People have remarkably resilient instincts to survive severe physical hardships. But they are highly susceptible to ideas, beliefs, and propaganda – whether they be truths, half-truths, or lies. Jesus taught them how to differentiate between the truth and the lies – political lies and religious lies. He warned against both “the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod” (Mark 8:15). He alerted them to be suspicious, especially of those who speak in the name of religion, “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matt. 16:6). Instead, Jesus announces to them the good news of God’s reconciling and liberating rule which has begun in his own incarnate Sonship. Jesus takes great pains to reveal to them, that the inbreaking of this Spirit-empowered new creation-order is first experienced by the creation of a new humanity that he himself creates in the midst of exploitation and oppression. Matthew writes, “When [Jesus] saw the crowds, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

The simile “like sheep without a shepherd” goes back to the Hebrew Scriptures. We first see it when Moses prays that God would appoint a successor after him, so that the Israelites “will not be like sheep without a shepherd” (Num. 27:17). Next, we see it when the prophet Micaiah warns that the ill-advised Israelite army would be abandoned on the battlefield “like sheep without a shepherd” (1 Kings 22:17). But the connection that Jesus was almost certainly making was to the prophecy in Ezekiel 34. When Ezekiel, who is himself now in exile in Babylon, starts receiving messages of hope and restoration rather than doom. God promises restorative justice to ordinary Israelites who had been oppressed by two powerful groups of people in their social ranks.

Firstly, in vv. 1-10, God condemns the “Shepherds of Israel”, their ruling elites who had willfully neglected their assigned responsibilities to administer justice and welfare.

Not being content with their remuneration and privileges (“milk, curds, and wool”), the ruling class had neglected, abused, and killed ordinary citizens.

You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and scattered they became food for all the wild animals. (4-5)

Secondly, the Lord then promises to replace these cruel, self-serving, shepherds with His own direct rule (vv. 11-16).

I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strays, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice (v. 16).

This divine kingship, Jeremiah later elaborates, God will exercise through the restoration of “my servant David” (23-24). We are not told how the long-dead David will be raised to be Israel’s once and future king. Somehow David’s rule will be embodied in a messianic king mediating God’s perfect justice. Interestingly, Ezekiel’s older contemporary Jeremiah has handed down a very similar oracle in 23:1-8. There too the prophet condemns the self-serving shepherds, promises to re-establish the just rule of David, but also adds another important element to his promise of restoration. Under the messianic and Davidic Chief Shepherd, the Lord promises to send Israel many compassionate shepherds. “I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall no longer fear or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord” (v. 4).

This reference to a plurality of shepherds serving under the Lord’s own paramount shepherding is one of the earliest usages of this imagery in the Hebrew Scriptures. It may well be the Hebrew scriptural source of the designation ‘shepherd’ (*poimen*) for the function of pastoral care in

the NT. If that is indeed the case, it certainly enriches our understanding of what pastoral care entails as a prophecy about restored Israel fulfilled in the Israel of God.

Far more distressing than the reckless powerplays of political leaders is the spiritual, sexual, and physical abuse inflicted on innocent children and gullible adults by so-called priests, pastors, and prophets. Reading about these acts of abuse by clergy with Jeremiah 23 and Ezekiel 34 in the background is all the more reason why such crimes must be diligently safeguarded against, and decisively dealt with.

As a seminary community who seek to impart and receive pastoral formation in the image of Jesus our Shepherd must take sober note of these warnings. The next part of Ezekiel's oracle is directed at the whole people of God, clergy and laity alike.

Thirdly, then, (vv. 17-22) Ezekiel directs the Lord's judgement not only against the cruel shepherds who are the exploitative rulers but also against the sheep – the common citizenry themselves. Tragically, as often happens under prolonged conditions of economic hardship, the oppressed begin to imitate their oppressors and begin to exploit the weaker members of their social order. In the interest of maintaining their power, rulers often instigate hatred between social groups. One class of citizens feel entitled to more than their fair share of resources and prevents the rest from having access to them.

Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you pushed with flank and shoulder and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²² I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged, and I will judge between sheep and sheep. (20-22)

Adversity does not always produce unity. Where there are inequalities to begin with, adversity tends to widen existing disparities. The Lord's chastisement of ordinary Israelites

exposes those latent tendencies to grab more than their fair share. It is frequently necessary to hold politicians, bureaucrats, the media, and other authorities accountable. But blaming ‘the system,’ ‘the 225,’ ‘fake news,’ ‘social media,’ etc. is also a convenient way of evading our individual and collective responsibility.

We in Sri Lanka have experienced instances when governing structures crashed due to natural disasters like the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, or man-made crises like the Vanni IDP camps, or the foreign exchange crisis of 2022. We have witnessed the deeply encouraging sign of the church at work. Despite being a sporadically persecuted minority in many parts of the country, small church communities were able to mobilize their pastors’ fellowships and home cell networks to organize the delivery of food and medical aid far more efficiently and accountably than state officials could. When shepherds fail, the flock needs to take care of each other and the neighbours around them. Jesus the Shepherd taught his flock to do that. Whenever the church has remembered its economic and social solidarities across political and racial divides, their witness to the gospel has shone brightly.

In times of global tensions and domestic pressures, when we are tempted to cancel each other due to our secondary differences, we need to call upon Jesus our Shepherd to hold us, his flock, together. We need to deal honestly with our frustrations and fears within relationships of trust. Jesus is our Shepherd, and we are the sheep of his pasture. He calls us to be safe in each other’s presence and be raised to be good shepherds like him.



As wide ranging as they are in content, the common theme running through this volume is the importance of Christian discipleship as integral (psycho-spiritual, theological, ethical, and missional) transformation. Cherian examines the distinctives of the Pentecostal experience in

theological education. Fernando highlights the contribution of the Wesleyan Methodist revival to discipleship in church life. Poobalan explores the potential pitfalls and portals for discipleship through the connectivity of digital space. Rubesh finds hope for the revitalisation of spiritual identity among Sri Lankan migrant worker and diaspora communities through his reflection on ancient Israel's experience of exile and diaspora. Somaratna offers insights into healing and recovery from traumatic loss as an aspect of discipleship in a Buddhist context through a comparative reading of the Buddhist story of Arahant Bhikkhuni Patāchārā and the Hebrew wisdom narrative of Job. All very valuable scholarly reflections for Sri Lankan church leaders, if they would care to read and benefit from them.

To conclude on a personal note, may I say how grateful I am for the privilege of co-editing and editing *JCTS* as a peer-reviewed journal from 2018. I pray that my successor will have more success in persuading the seminary's younger faculty and postgraduate alumni to commit the time and effort required to contribute to academic theological writing not only in English but also in Sinhala and Tamil. When *JCTS* becomes a trilingual journal it will better serve the Sri Lankan church, as our contributor Shari de Costa reminds us.

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