

Easter 4A Good Shepherd and Criminal Justice Sunday Archdeacon Sue Jacka

The Good Shepherd readings have been popular throughout time. Psalm 23 is surely the most popular psalm in Scripture and for good reason. Personally I use it as a meditation when I need to de-stress or when I am finding it difficult to fall asleep because my mind is still focussed on various issues from a busy day. These readings are a great source of comfort, reminding us that God is our provider and protector and promises to be with us even in those difficult 'valley of the shadow of death' experiences. We are assured that God will be faithful and provide the necessities of life- not in a miserly way, but so that the table will be bountifully spread and the cup will overflow. These are beautiful images of God's generosity and promise of an abundant life. God also promises to lead us beside the needed 'still waters' when stress levels rise.

Even more significantly, today's Gospel points to the intimacy of the relationship that Jesus calls us to be an active participant in. We become so close to him that we come to know the voice of our Good Shepherd and we are prepared to follow him.

Some years ago, Ross and I went to India for a holiday. When we travel, we do like to see some of the wonderful local icons: the beautiful buildings, natural features and famous places from history. But we also like to get out of the tourist zones and see how the real people live- not just those who are involved in the tourist industry. We spent some time in the small town of Mussori in the foothills of the Himalayas, where some friends were working at an international school. It was there that I first saw modern day shepherds leading their small flocks- a mix of sheep and goats. These young people- often girls- would call out to their sheep as they went along the roadsides in search of green pastures to provide the feed they needed. Sometimes we saw more than one shepherd with their sheep. Possibly they had joined together for company, but as the day would come to an end, they would need to take their own flock home. The idea of the individual sheep knowing and listening for its shepherd's voice made sense in this context, although it is so different for our big farm Australian experience, even for people with a rural background.

Yet the people who followed Jesus, even the Pharisees to whom our Gospel passage is addressed, understood the value of sheep to their local economy. Sheep provided them with milk, wool and meat. Sheep need to be looked after if they are going to live productive and contented lives and so they provide a good image for how God looks after us! We see these images in Psalm 23 and throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, there are many exhortations to recognise that just like sheep, we have gone astray and we need to ask for forgiveness and seek to live in a way that pleases God. They also provided a bit of a bench mark for Godly leadership. Jesus picked up these images and so we hear the passage from John 10 a critique of how the current religious leaders were looking after God's sheep

This criticism by Jesus of the Pharisees has been growing. In John 9, the Pharisees had ended up being the ones who were blind after the healing of the blind man because they could not 'see' the new thing that God was doing through Jesus. Their arrogant disbelief that Jesus could possibly have healed this blind man underlies an attitude that is all too easy for any of us to fall into today. We simply **know that our way of doing things**, of being God's people is right. It is very easy to not examine the values and attitudes which undergird our own habits. In John 10 Jesus tells the Pharisees that anyone who *does not*

enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. This is one of Jesus' famous Gospel reversals where he takes what people thought they knew and gives it a whole new meaning. How does one enter the Kingdom of God? It is by faith in me, Jesus proclaims by his words and his actions; it is not through keeping endless rules and rituals. The leaders have lost focus: they have become blind to the needs of their people, they are not providing helpful pastoral care for their sheep. They have become thieves, taking what is not theirs and abusing their authority. The Shepherd king was called to reflect the divine by protecting the poor and weak and to suffer the burdens of their office on behalf of the people. They were to lead the people to a better life. This image should have been formative for the ministry of the Pharisees but the lure of long phylacteries and pomp and ceremony seems to have blinded them to their roles.

I believe this remains a constant challenge for the church and for each of us today. We are called to be like Jesus to look out for the needs of others with compassion and hope especially those who are different or who do not seem to fit with our own understanding of what is acceptable. What are the things which subvert us today as we seek to live out our baptismal vows of bringing the light of Christ to others? How can we each shape our lives and ministry so that we fulfil Jesus promise to bring life in all its fullness?

This week we celebrate Criminal Justice Sunday and all the work of chaplains who work in our prison system, bringing hope and possibility of lasting change to the men, women and young people in jail. We remember the work of the volunteers who mentor prisoners as they make the transition from life on the inside to life outside - hopefully one of productivity, good relationships and avoiding the traps that led them to jail. We are called to encourage all people including those on the margins of society- and that certainly includes former prisoners- to know that God loves them and to come to recognise the voice of their Shepherd too. Throughout Jesus' ministry he associated with people who were considered less than acceptable by many of the religious leaders. His understanding of forgiveness was expansive and his teaching that each of us both needs to be forgiven and to extend forgiveness are constant challenges for Christians today.

In John 10: 16, just a few verses down from our Gospel today we read ¹⁶ *I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also.* Jesus is aware that others also need to hear of the love God has for them. How does Jesus bring this good news to others? He uses us to be his hands, his feet, and to show his love to others. We are called to be a welcoming people, we are called to love people who are 'not like us.'

There are many other ways we can be supportive and show God's love. One of the biggest needs today is simply listening, really hearing what others are saying. I think it is important to go beyond the basic words people might say to the deeper concerns that they may only intimate by their body language or their facial expressions. This gift of time and friendship is a very loving and helpful thing, especially in those difficult times when there may not be much to be said. When people are grieving, or troubled by an issue that they simply cannot control, words may not be much use. Sharing time, or a cuppa or doing something positive- like going for a walk, helping in the garden, looking after children- these ways of assistance may well be more supportive than material support or words could be. I think it's also

helpful to see if a prayer would be well received too. Of course Christians will always be praying for people we meet who are distressed. Often we keep those prayers between us and God. It can be very comforting and supportive to others if we offer to pray for someone. I encourage you to try it!

This week, can I ask you to reflect on how Jesus is the Good Shepherd for you? Can I also encourage you to consider how you can pass on that love and care to others?