

22/4 John 10:10b-18 Good Shepherd Sunday

"I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

I spent many of my growing up years and young adulthood singing in choirs. It was in the choir that I met my first boyfriend and sat next to him on the bus on our way back to Canberra from the eisteddfod in Sydney, kissing in the darkness. I remember choir camps walking up to a little cemetery in the middle of the night and singing Ave Maria there, and changing into our choir uniforms in the hall of Christ Church St Lawrence near Central Station in Sydney, after a long bus trip, then performing and travelling home again.

The director of the choir, Judith Clingan, held us gently but firmly, and brought the best out of each one of us so that in the end we produced the most beautiful music. She pulled us into line. She called forth our best.

Today in the church's calendar we celebrate good Shepherd Sunday. I think the role of director of music has some similarities with this Good Shepherd. The choir director is the one who knows us by name, goes out of their way to advocate on our behalf, is present with us no matter what is going on.

Perhaps God is like good choir leader, and for us, being in tune with God means singing in harmony, singing the song we are called to sing, being who we, making our unique contribution in community.

See this 19th century Russian icon of Jesus as the Good Shepherd?

In the Orthodox tradition icons are considered to be windows to the Divine, like music, a way of understanding or experiencing the spiritual world, the world beyond our

normal senses. They are theology in colours. They are considered to be sacramental, mediators of the presence of God.¹

This is the good shepherd.

In this icon, I am particularly struck by the huge, grey cloak billowing out from Jesus' shoulders which looks like a stormy sea. As though he is carrying all the storms of our lives.

The Good Shepherd carries the lost sheep – bigger and muddier than your average lamb, which is the usual fare in Christian depictions. That's me, you, all those who struggle to sing in tune, to play our part.. The sheep looks to Jesus for life, fullness of life.

Jesus is clothed in a deep pink- red tunic – the colour of the heart and blood and life – there is a sense here of the open heart.

Faces in icons don't express emotions in the way we often see in Western religious art. Looking at the face of Jesus here, we see, not "stoic" bearing up in the face of suffering, but a deep stability in this face. A sense of deep presence . . . "I am" ... I am for you.²

There is movement and stability, the great conductor, choir director, God who was and is and is to be, who desires for each and everyone of us rich abundant fullness of life, and is there for us in good times and in bad..

Jesus says "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

This is what we are on about here, fullness of life, abundant life. For many of us that includes singing, for some it includes listening to and appreciating music, for some of us it is about dancing or gardening or farming or computering.

¹ https://resources.holycovenant.org.au/docs/sermons/2009/Sermon_2009-10-11.pdf

² Jane Foulcher

Jesus said "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

'Abundant life. That phrase, as much as any in the Bible, captures what I long for, how about you?.

Not just *more* life, but *abundant* life. Not just *more* stuff, but life -- *real* life. Jesus in this passage makes a promise, a huge promise, a life-changing promise.³

David Lose comments:

He's not the only one who makes promises. Most of the ads we're subjected to day in and day out also promise abundant life, but it is abundance understood precisely as more -- more money, more possessions, more cars, more sex, more Facebook friends, more.... You can fill in the blanks as well as I can of all the things proffered promising to give us life.

Of course there's a cost to buying into ads. Actually, it costs two things.

First, you need to believe you are insufficient, that you are not good enough and do not have enough. That you are not worthy, in fact, of love and respect and happiness unless you purchase whatever is being advertised. That is, ads work precisely by creating in us a sense of lack, a sense of profound insufficiency. And the only way to satisfy that lack is to buy the product in question, and that's the lure of ads.

The second cost is that it's a lie. Whatever you buy -- sneakers, iPad, car, deodorant, whatever -- may be just great in and of themselves. But guess what? It's not going to fill that sense of need or rid you of that sense of lack. In fact, disappointed once again, you may end up just going shopping again -- or overeating, or shooting up, or settling for someone who doesn't value you, or whatever -- hoping against hope that this time it'll work and you'll be acceptable,

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1531>

and sometime the church falls into this thinking too, making us think that we are not enough for God...

But, against this backdrop, hear again the promise of Jesus: "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

But Jesus doesn't just make a promise, he puts his money where his mouth is. Or, more accurately, he puts his life where his promise is: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And "I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."

But why? Why does Jesus the good shepherd lay down his life?

To tell us that we are, in fact, *enough*.

Jesus, especially in John's gospel, doesn't die in order to make some kind of payment to God or to satisfy God's wrath or to pay the penalty for sin. Jesus, in John's Gospel, is the *Revealer*, the One who comes to make the invisible God visible and the unapproachable God accessible.

Jesus comes to reveal that God loves the whole world, no exceptions.

Jesus comes, that is, to tell us that we are already beloved, that we are enough, that we need no shoes or car or reputation or lover or high status job or list of achievements or anything else to be deserving of God's love. That -- God's unconditional and unending love -- we've already got.

That can be hard to believe. So many messages, so much money, are devoted to trying to tell us that we are not enough, that we are not worthy of love, that we need to earn acceptance.

And it's our job and privilege to name those messages a lie and to point to the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep -- *for us!* -- simply out of love.

But it *is* hard to believe at times. Let's make no mistake about that. Which is why we should listen to even more of Jesus' message: "I lay down my life for the sheep," he says. "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." Jesus, in other words, didn't come just for the original group of disciples. He came also for us, and we are now invited to hear and believe this message of grace and acceptance and to share it with each other and all those we meet.⁴

Let me tell you again: you are a beloved child of God, and you are enough.

You are a beloved child of God and you are enough.

Susanna

⁴ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1531>