

*the good shepherd*  
a sermon preached on the  
*fourth sunday of easter*  
17 April 2016  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by dr muriel porter*

lections: Acts 9: 36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7: 9-17; John 10: 11-30

We have arrived at the fourth Sunday of Easter, and while we are still very much in the wonderful Easter season, the readings before us have taken a sharp turn. We have moved away from the Resurrection appearances that dominated the first three weeks – the Easter morning appearances to Mary Magdalene and the other women disciples, Jesus' surprising presence in the locked Upper Room, and the scene by the Sea of Galilee where Jesus prepares a barbecue breakfast for some disciples who had gone fishing. Now we have moved to Gospel readings that steer us to contemplate just what the resurrection means for us.

Today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is traditionally Good Shepherd Sunday. Not only does today's Gospel identify Jesus as the shepherd, but so does the second reading, from the Revelation to St John. And of course, the psalm set for the day is the all-time favourite, the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, 'The Lord is my shepherd'. The psalm offers a beautiful pastoral image – a gentle shepherd tenderly caring for his lambs in green pastures, beside still waters. And when the going gets tough, entering dark valleys, the shepherd is there as protector and guide. More, the shepherd provides such generous sustenance at table that the psalmist cries, 'my cup overflows'. The shepherd here is a maternal image of lavish love and care in all circumstances. It is no wonder that this psalm is so often used in funeral services or at other times of grief and distress.

Without detracting from the solace the psalm so evidently provides, we need to be aware that the image there can become quite sentimental, slipping into a soothing, superficial, 'lambs and flowers' scenario. So many pictorial images of Jesus the Good Shepherd – and there are a myriad of them, they are extremely popular – depict a serene Jesus wandering about a flower-bedecked field with happy lambs gamboling around him.

Today's Gospel reveals however the gutsy reality of why the Lord is the Good Shepherd. The Shepherd is Good because he lays down his life for his sheep. That is spelt out quite clearly – Jesus twice describes himself as the Good Shepherd and makes plain that he is the Good Shepherd because he willingly and freely lays down his life for his sheep. It is a very costly shepherding indeed.

I mentioned earlier that the shepherd can be seen as a maternal image. Pictorial representations of the Good Shepherd often depict Jesus carrying a frail little lamb over his shoulders as he gently leads his flock to a safe place and good pasture. Conventionally it is mothers who carry babies, and shepherd toddlers and older children, who nurture them and protect them. This can be a sentimental image as well, as we see only too obviously in the lead up to mothers' day, when fluffy slippers and breakfast in bed dominate advertisements. But motherhood too is often costly – mothers and indeed fathers sometimes come to the point of having to lay down their own lives for their children. Parenthood can be very costly. Think of women struggling to protect their families in African countries stricken with famine, walking vast distances to find food for their little ones, often giving up their own food to put it in their children's mouths. Many of you will have experienced the costly side of parenthood in varying ways.

So there is nothing sentimental about the image of the Good Shepherd in today's Gospel. He is good because he lays down his life for the sheep. And lays it down freely. He also declares that he takes it up again, prefiguring his resurrection.

The reading from the Revelation to John highlights this focus as well. Yes, it refers to Jesus as the Shepherd, but he is the shepherd because he is the Lamb – the Lamb of God. He is described as the Lamb there no fewer than four times. Don't imagine this is an image of a fluffy baby sheep, cute and cuddly. No, this image relates directly to the lambs who were slaughtered in their thousands in the Jerusalem Temple precincts each year for the Passover meal. They were the *paschal* lambs, paschal meaning Passover. And of course Paschal has for us come to mean 'Easter'. We speak of the 'Paschal mystery; we are guided on Easter morning by the Paschal candle. In John's Gospel, Jesus' death on the cross is depicted as happening at the very time the Passover lambs, who had to be lambs without blemish, were being slaughtered in a complex priestly ritual. Jesus is, for John and for St Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians,<sup>1</sup> the Paschal Lamb, the Passover Lamb who was sacrificed for us.

Just as the Passover meal commemorated the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, so the sacrifice of the Good Shepherd, who lay down his life, liberated humankind from all that alienates us from God – from sin, violence, pain and death. And Jesus the Lamb of God does more than lay down his life; he takes it up again. "I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it up again," Jesus says, claiming for himself divine authority over his life. His death leads to life, resurrection life, not just for himself, but also for us.

Today's Gospel reading spells out what that means – it means not just life after death, but eternal life here and now. And what is the quality of eternal life, for all who hear Jesus' voice and follow him? It is there in both the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm and in the reading from Revelation.

The Good Shepherd's leading, guiding, restoring depicted in the psalm offers a quality of life that is eternal. It is more than just temporal protection from immediate danger; it is protection from the evil that would draw us back into alienation from God. It is an image of what the new creation in the risen Christ is like – abundant life, God's life in us, dwelling in the house of the Lord forever.

The image continues in Revelation: no more hunger, no more thirst, no more danger, no more pain or tears. Even though we do in this mortal life continue to experience danger and pain and tears, it is not the end of the story for us. The love of God that wipes away all tears is embedded within us.

The Good Shepherd image, then, is more than a striking metaphor for the loving, gentle way Jesus cares for us. It is no less than an image for the all-embracing, ever-patient, sacrificial love of God for us – God's vulnerable, wayward, silly sheep. As a former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, once put it so memorably, 'God is Christlike, and in [God] is no un-Christlikeness at all, and the glory of God in all eternity is that ceaseless self-giving love of which Calvary is the measure'.<sup>2</sup> In Jesus, we see the fullness of God; in the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd, we have before us a powerful, reassuring and comforting portrayal of our loving God as we continue to celebrate our Lord's Resurrection, and our own.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:7

<sup>2</sup> A.M.Ramsey, *God, Christ and the World: a Study in Contemporary Theology*. London: SCM, 1969. p41.