

the good shepherd
a sermon preached on the
fourth sunday of easter
12 May 2019
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23, Revelation 7:9-17, John 10:22-30

During my childhood, I lived on several farms, each of which had flocks of sheep. Our sheep were small flocks – kept for a little wool which was sold and for meat for ourselves and the families who worked for my father.

I have wonderful memories of frosty, early morning musters in shearing season with a small mob of sheep being herded by a team of men whom I had the privilege of joining, as long as I behaved and didn't get in the way. With us, of course, was the mandatory kelpie sheepdog to complete this pastoral scene. In particular I remember the contest of wills between these three species of animal, as the reluctant sheep were compelled toward a narrow gate, all steamy breath and bleating, but unwilling while the humans whistled and shouted, and the dog barked. Eventually one sheep would summon the foolishness to scarper through and the rest would follow.

I also vividly remember the shearing shed. The deafening staccato clatter of the shearing machines, the bleating, the yelling, the piles of snowy, oily wool and above all its lanoline smell.

Today's readings are redolent with this lanoline. Sheep and shepherds are everywhere in a sequence of texts designed to reinforce in us with the consolation and assurance of the resurrection. Peter prays over Tabitha and instigates her miraculous recovery – an echo, surely, of Jesus' own resurrection, an active promise that we too will rise on the last day.

In the Psalm, the rod and the staff that comfort are a reference to the shepherd's crook, now symbolised in a bishop's crosier. I heard this explained by Archbishop David Moxon, then bishop of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. New Zealanders know a thing or two about sheep.

He said that in ancient Mediterranean agricultural practice, shepherds built circular sheepfolds from stone, topped with thorns and a small opening through which the sheep could be led for protection at night. The shepherd would sleep across the opening to prevent wolves from getting at the sheep. If the wolves howled during the night and the sheep became restive, the shepherd would lay the long shaft of his staff, his crook, across their backs to remind them he was there and all was well – your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

These bucolic, pastoral images, however, fall away when we come to the gospel. Jesus is in Solomon's portico in the Temple in Jerusalem and he is challenged by "the Jews", by which we understand the author means the scribes and Pharisees of the Temple cult, not the Jewish people in general. They want him to come clean about his claim to be from God, they want him to claim to be the Messiah. It is a trap they have set. They want him to claim his messianic status because if he does, they can convict him of heresy.

Or, alternatively perhaps, if his messianic claim is credible, they can procure him for their own and recruit him into their particular vision of the messianic return, when Israel will dominate absolutely, her enemies vanquished by the sword and the throne of David restored in militaristic triumph. There would be a decisive election of those who are in (the Israelites) and those who are out (the Gentiles).

Jesus answers them in a parable, saying, don't go by what I say but by what I do. Those who follow me, my sheep, they know me. They know that I will protect them, they know that they do not need to fear, they know that nothing you can do to them will allow you to prevail. Their future is assured. In the pastoral imagery of sheep and shepherds, the Pharisees most resemble wolves.

This parabolic imagery veils, however, a stinging riposte that still speaks to us today. Jesus' sheep-ish model is a critical challenge to human society in the first century and remains so today. It rejects competitive ambition as it is practiced in the winner-takes-all form of modern politics, in particular, where the losers are excluded from "normal, successful" society. Think Israel's conquest of Canaan. Think Neoliberalism's conquest of the economic order. Jesus' sheep-ish model favours a more gentle inclusiveness where none are lost; everyone may seek protection within the sheepfold.

It rejects the inequality that the winner-takes-all version of meritocracy creates, in favour of opportunity for all regardless of wealth or family or political influence or social status. It critiques "effectiveness" and "productivity" as the qualifications for reasonable material wealth. Therefore, it also critiques our desire for security, especially financial security, but also military security and immigration security because these rely on human effort and effectiveness rather than dependence on the provision and protection of the shepherd.

I also read in this parable a critique of our quest for the perfect life and our inordinate fear of the death that is inevitable, instead of, on this reading, having faith in the shepherd at the gate and the sheepfold.

Each of these texts encourages us to greater confidence on the evidence of Jesus' resurrection. That surely is what happened to Peter. Prior to the resurrection Peter was just one of the sheep. He bleated a fair bit and butted horns but when it came to going through the gate, when he was challenged on the night of the Passion to acknowledge his discipleship, he stopped short. He couldn't bring himself to take the extra few steps and he ran back to the mob.

But then something happened. Jesus' resurrection was Peter's lead, allowing him to gather the courage to pass through that narrow opening of commitment and leadership. The outcome is described in his encounter with Tabitha. Peter is no longer a sheep; he too has become a shepherd.

In the light of the resurrection that we celebrate in this Easter season, we might gather up Peter's courage to stand apart from the wolves, to become shepherds who protect the sheep, shepherds who stand up to the wolves, going head to head with them on the state of our community, on the state of our relations with our neighbours, especially those who come to us seeking protection, on the state of our own marginalised for whom society becomes less and less a place they feel they belong.

To stand up on behalf of the sheep-ish. As shepherds we are called to contend with a society whose foreshortened vision of life is one that ends at the grave, one led by wolves, one that turns our children into wolves not as Jesus would have, gathering them as sheep into the sheepfold.

Christ is risen, alleluia.