

Easter 4 – Sermon – 15th May 2011 – Wesley 9am & 10.30am - DT

Theme: “Jesus says, ‘I am the gate’ and ‘I am the good shepherd’.

Introduction

Today, with the mining boom, we tend to forget that Australia rode the prosperous years of the 1860’s – 1950’s on the ‘sheep’s back’, so to speak.

Flocks were huge and we supplied much of the world’s wool. We tend to forget also, some of our European history with the great shearers’ strikes over the narrow and wide comb shears issue and the fights between the cattle and sheep graziers.

Part of our folk history is embedded in this time combined with the various gold rushes in various parts of the country pre 1900.

For us in Australia, sheep have been hugely important in the development of our modern history both financially and attitudinally.

Henry Lawson, our great bush poet, wrote the following entitled “Shearers” back, I think, in the 1880’s or early 1890’s.

“No church-bell rings them from the Track

No pulpit light their blindness-

‘Tis hardship, drought and homelessness

That teach those Bushmen kindness:

The mateship born, in barren lands,

Of toil and thirst and danger,

The camp-fare for the wanderer set,

The first place to the stranger.

They do the best they can today-

Take no thought of the morrow;

Their way is not the old-world way –

They live to lend and borrow.

When shearing’s done and cheques gone wrong.

They call it ‘time to slither!’

They saddle up and say ‘So-long!’

And ride the Lord knows whither.

*And though he may be brown or black,
Or wrong man there, or right man.
The mate that's steadfast to his mates
They call that man a 'white man!'
They tramp in mateship side by side –
The Protestant and the Roman –
They call no biped lord or sir,
And touch their hat to no man!*

*They carry in their swags, perhaps,
A portrait and a letter –
And, maybe, deep down in their hearts,
They hope of 'something better'.
Where lonely miles are long to ride,
And long, hot days recurrent,
There's lots of time to think of men
They might have been – but weren't.*

*They turn their faces to the west
And leave the world behind them
(Their drought-dry graves are seldom set
Where even mates can find them).*

*They know too little of the world
To rise to wealth or greatness:
But in these lines I gladly pay
My tribute to their straightness.*

While some of these words may seem strange to us today we hear in this poem the independence, welcoming nature, the importance of mateship, the straight-forwardness in individuals and the disregards for authority which has become much of the characteristics that makes many Australians what they are today. Oddly it has come not only from the land but those who were

shearers and involved in that industry. Certainly a very different scenario to the one Jesus talked about and yet there are also similarities.

Middle

In Jesus' time the shepherd was often both the gate-keeper to the flock as well as their shepherd. Flocks were generally only small 20-100 and the shepherd would know the sheep individually – quite different to our Australian setting where we have mobs of tens of thousands of sheep. We rarely even call them a flock because there are so many – it's a mob!.

While grazing in the countryside the shepherd would make a night-time pen for the flock, often out of thorn bushes, to keep the sheep penned in and safe. Across the entrance, the gate if you like, the shepherd would sleep, with a fire close by, guarding the flock from the danger of wild animals or those who might come to try to steal sheep. Hence, literally the shepherd's body was the gate. So the shepherd would herd the sheep into the pen and then call them out in the morning, checking that all were accounted for.

For the shepherd this was a risky job protecting the sheep from both the wild animals and thieves as well as making sure the sheep had adequate pasture and water.

Interpretation

How do we interpret this parable and/or sayings of Jesus?

In vs 9 we read: 'I am the gate; who-ever enters through me
will be saved. He will come in and go out,
and find pasture.'

A couple of points to make here. It is through Christ, the gate, that we are saved. However we are not called to simply stay in the safe confines of the pen, the church if you like. Rather, there is a time to be hand fed and enjoy the fellowship of the church family or flock but there is more time to be spent out in the world sharing with those in need and caring for the wider flock. Jesus was a risk taker and one who was 'out there' where people are, not simply cloistered in a safe environment. If we look at his life we see that.

Jesus could have stayed at home and plied his trade but he didn't. He left home, wandered the countryside and picked up a mixture of disciples. He associated with the undesirables like tax collectors and prostitutes yet still had conversations with the well-to-do.

He touched the lives of lepers, the unclean and yet had the wealthy to bury him. He told radical stories and challenged the law makers, along with the religious and political leaders of his day.

Yet he still retreated and spent time being renewed in prayer and 'time-out'. Jesus the gate-keeper, Jesus the shepherd, is a risk taker and one who went to where the people were. This is part of the challenge for the church today to recognise the need to be nurtured but also the need to be 'out there' in the community.

For we in the Uniting Church have the added challenge to link our social outreach, which is Uniting Care, more closely into the congregational life/worship life of the church. Few people realise that we as a denomination have the largest welfare services in Australia outside the government. We have a workforce larger than BHP Billiton with more than 65,000 people working for different aspects of the community in the not-for-profit sector. This care is based on our Christian conviction of Jesus the good shepherd and we need to be proclaiming it.

Many who work in childcare services, hospitals, aged care facilities, family services etc and come under the umbrella of Uniting Care don't even realise that they are working indirectly for the church or why the church provides such services. Part of the Gospel for today gives us the impetus for this risky work – it is Christ the good shepherd who is also the gate-keeper of his flock. Praise be to God who through Christ takes risks on us as the people of God today – what a mob we are!!!!

Conclusion

Let me finish with a brief paraphrase of Psalm 23 from Bruce Prewer's 'More Australian Psalms' p51

The Lord is my drover,

I travel well.

On outback tracks

He finds green feed;

He guides me safely

to cool water holes.