

Easter 4 – 9am Wesley – 26th April 2015

Theme: “Jesus the good shepherd”

Readings: John 10:11-18 and 1 John 3:16-24

Text: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” John 10:11

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.”
1 John 3:16

Introduction

Today’s lectionary readings move us from the post resurrection appearances of Jesus to the nature of God’s work in the world. John uses the metaphor of Jesus as the good shepherd and contrasts the good shepherd with the hired hand. We’ll look at that in a moment. However, much of the imagery of Jesus as the good shepherd is lost on us in Australia today. With something like 85% of all Australians living in the major coastal cities, many younger Australians or those new to this country have no or limited knowledge of farming and some have only seen sheep at Royal shows or children’s patting zoos. This is the reality. Even if people have seen some of the countryside it is simply sheep in large paddocks and that is it. There is no sense of what is required to look after the sheep, the drenching, crutching, making sure the feed is appropriate, lambing, mulesing, shearing, breeding for fine wool or fat lambs that mature quickly, mustering and the list goes on. This is the reality today but so different in Jesus’ time and he uses an image from the Old Testament, but talks about himself in terms of the good shepherd. People would have understood this imagery far better back then than we do today.

Let us look at the image of a ‘shepherd’ in Jesus’ time

A shepherd would have had a small flock of say 20-50 sheep. A large flock would probably have been 100 and had a shepherd and a herder with him. The shepherd knew all the sheep and being a lonely existence, no doubt the shepherd spoke to the sheep so they knew his voice and responded to him.

The shepherd would take the sheep out to find good food which could well be away from where he lived. No fences back then, just grazing land. At night the shepherd would make a rough enclosure for the sheep to gather into, often made of thorn bushes to keep out wild animals and intruders. By the entrance the shepherd would make a fire, both for warmth and protection, and would sleep across the entrance to make sure the sheep were kept safe and nothing slipped in to kill the sheep. Hence the shepherd lived with the sheep, guarded them with his own life and knew each sheep by its character or defining marks and so was aware of his whole flock. Quite different to the massive flocks of sheep we have today of say 50,000 plus on some stations.

It is into this context that Jesus speaks of himself: “I am the good shepherd”.

Jesus says ‘I am the good shepherd’ – let us examine this.

There are seven “I am” sayings in John’s Gospel.

These are: John 6:35 “I am the bread of life”
John 8:12 “I am the light of the world”
John 10:7 “I am the gate”
John 10:11 “I am the good shepherd”
John 11:25 “I am the resurrection and the life”
John 14:6 “I am the way and the truth and the life”
John 15:1 “I am the true vine”

These seven “I am” sayings (Greek is: *‘ego eimi’*) is a way that Jesus meshes his mission with God’s purposes and work in creation. These sayings give a picture description of what Jesus’ ministry is about and some of the areas where he offers hope to the world through his mission and ministry.

Today with Jesus saying ‘I am the *good shepherd*’, this word ‘good’ (Greek is *‘kalos’*) can be translated or implies, ‘that which is ordered’, sound, ideal, true, competent, faithful, trustworthy and noble. Jesus is not just any run-of-the-mill shepherd, rather he embodies strength, care, kindness, power, mercy and sympathy. For the people, he leads, guides, feeds, protects, seeks and will give up his life for his flock.

In contrast, the hired hand runs at the first sign of danger. The hired hand is concerned only with monetary gain, expends the minimum amount of work needed to care for the sheep. It is purely a job and no more.

In contrast to that, the good shepherd does not merely care for the sheep but also gathers the flock. In John’s understanding those who hear, see and believe in Jesus belong to the community, Jesus’ flock if you like. The door is wide open to outcasts of the day – sinners, lepers, women, Samaritans, tax collectors and more. Jesus is concerned for the individual and corporate welfare of all.

Hence today’s passage speaks of intimacy, security, care and love.

The relational side of the Gospel is evident here, so much so that Jesus will lay down his life for us.

Called to be community – what does this mean for us today?

The model of Jesus as the pastoral and spiritual leader through this image of the Good Shepherd is a strong mental picture that has impacted the church over the centuries. For us today, we still see this as a basic role of clergy and elders within our faith communities. Yet in this modern age we struggle with pastoral care, we struggle as to what is appropriate with spiritual welfare and to what extent are we permitted into people’s lives.

For me, as a clergy person, I feel blessed to be allowed to share with individuals and families in special times in their lives. With wedding preparation and services, baptism or dedication of infants, preparation for confirmation, sharing in times of grief, being present at celebrations to mark special occasions, to be able to offer a listening ear when things are tough or some-one wants to bounce something over you. The pastoral and spiritual occasions are part of the community of faith and I feel blessed to be involved so often.

However, the shepherd also had the hard, lonely and sometimes dangerous times. I’m not so sure about some of those personally and I struggle with hard decisions, on occasions.

A passage like this reminds me of the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus for us and sometimes we have to tackle those hard decisions.

1 John 3:16-18 puts it into practical terms for the faith community, in a sense for you and me today.

“This is how we know what love is:

Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in them. Dear children let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”

For me, this section is at the heart of our faith community, or at least should be. Here is the practical challenge of our faith, to be not something purely spiritual but also practical.

This is the living out of our faith in practical ways. Sometimes within our local community of faith, sometimes wider through other things, sometimes internationally.

Three practical things I bring to you today.

1. I need some more support financially for Solomon Gnanapragasam. Solomon has been told that his final hearing as to whether he can stay in Australia or be returned to Sri Lanka will occur on 16th September. While he has a visa to stay in Australia currently, his right to work has been withdrawn. This makes it almost impossible for Solomon to remain in Australia as he has to live and pay bills especially his legal bill for the challenge. He had worked several jobs for two years and had shown how he could be part of Australian society in a positive way. The current government have withdrawn his work visa, hence I'm asking that we try to support Solomon.
2. Secondly we need to pray for the people of Vanuatu and particularly the church there. I met with Mereani Korovavala last week as she was back from there for a few days. The church they attended in Port Vila was demolished by the cyclone. She had bought a few Bibles to take back and I was able to send a carton of Bibles back with her as well. We need to keep these people in our prayers and possibly support them in practical ways to help re-build the church there. Something I've asked Lesi and Mereani to think about is 'how we can practically support our brothers and sisters in Christ in Vanuatu?' I'll keep you informed on this situation.
3. The Parish Camp is coming up in a few weeks' time, 15-17th May. Even if you don't go you may like to sponsor some-one else to go who may have difficulty paying the full amount. Simply put some dollars in the envelope marked 'Sponsor for Church Camp' and this will support some-one else or a family attending the camp.

These are simple, but practical things we can do as a community that builds the church locally and further afield. Remember in our Christian witness, "Jesus the Good Shepherd laid down his life for us."

Take seriously our care and compassion along with the sense of social justice for others based on the love of Christ who sacrificed all for us. Amen.