

The Good Shepherd - Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 10:1-10

03/05/20

by Colleen Clayton

Grant, O God, that in the written word, and through the spoken word, we may behold the living Word, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is particularly lovely to begin my ministry in this community of St Matthew's Cheltenham in Year A of our Australian Lectionary. Year A, as I'm sure you know, is the year of Matthew and most of the Gospel readings for this liturgical year are taken from the Gospel that is named for our Patron Saint.

Our lectionary has a three-year cycle and devotes one year each to the Synoptic Gospels; Matthew, Mark and Luke. These three Gospels are called *synoptic* meaning that they give a comprehensive view of Jesus' life. Although there are distinct differences between them, they include many of the same stories, often in a similar sequence and sometimes with identical wording.

Instead of having a year of its own, John's Gospel is represented across all three years, mostly in Lent and Easter. In Lent we hear John's wonderful symbolic writing about who Jesus is, and in Easter we hear Jesus' parting messages for his disciples about how to be church. And so today, we have heard John's wonderful writing about Jesus the Good Shepherd.

The image of the Good Shepherd has captured the imagination of Christians across the centuries. It is the most common Christian symbol found in the Roman catacombs. Beautiful stained-glass windows depict Jesus carrying lambs on his shoulders and there are countless musical settings of the 23rd Psalm, the psalm set for today.

Despite the fact that life in contemporary Australia does not expose us to Biblical style shepherding, it is still imagery that conveys a rich picture of the relationship between shepherd and sheep.

These are some of the things our readings teach us. The Good Shepherd;

- Loves the sheep and develops a close, intimate relationship with them so that they know the shepherd's voice and trust the shepherd
- Understands the needs of the sheep better than they do themselves.
- Understands what threatens sheep and what makes them sick

- Works tirelessly to provide protection and security, defending the sheep against all their enemies, and is prepared to sacrifice himself for them
- Leads the sheep to fresh pastures and fresh water
- Goes ahead of the sheep and prepares the path for them
- Wants the sheep to be content, well-fed, and safe.

That is quite a list! These are the promises to us of the kind of relationship that God, our Good Shepherd, wants to have with us, God's sheep. This is a picture of a God who wants to have an active, practical relationship with us, who is concerned with our everyday needs and concerns and who wants us to enjoy abundant life.

Sheep don't have a reputation for being the brightest of God's creatures, so before you become offended by the comparison, let me say that sheep are not as stupid as they are often portrayed to be. They are in fact, exceptionally good at being sheep. Their reputation for being stupid comes from the fact that, as animals who are preyed upon by others, they do not respond to things in the same way as we predatory humans.

However, in psychological testing, sheep have been found to have an intelligence that is at the same level as rodents, monkeys and in some tests (for example, face recognition) at the same level as humans!

Now that I hope I have given you a new respect for the species, let us consider sheep and their tendencies.

1. Sheep do better in flocks, they need the support and encouragement of their own kind. Unfortunately, that also means they can lead each other astray.
2. Sheep are easily startled and when they are they sometimes make decisions that lead them into further trouble.
3. Sheep are vulnerable, especially if they are young, sick or isolated. They need protection.
5. Sheep can learn and remember.
6. Sheep recognise familiar faces and voices. They are affectionate and respond well to what they know.
7. Sheep like to follow.

I'm sure you can see that sheep and shepherds are made for each other! From our point of view as the sheep, we can relax knowing that our Good Shepherd is going to faithfully love and care for us, seeking us out and rejoicing in us no matter what. He tells us that he came so that we might

have abundant life, so we can also be assured that our shepherd always desires what is best for us.

We are blessed to be the sheep of such a shepherd. Our Good Shepherd knows and understands that we are sheep. When we sheep remember our need for a shepherd, then we can work to deepen our relationship with our shepherd so that we enjoy the abundant life he wants for us. These are some of the ways we can do this.

1. Know the Good Shepherd

Sheep do not do well with the unknown. They are easily startled and are fearful of the threat that a stranger may pose. So, we need to make sure we know our shepherd.

The kind of knowledge that we need involves more than just our heads. Our image of God as a shepherd comes from the Hebrew people and for them, knowing is not an intellectual exercise. In the Hebrew world, knowledge happens not in the head but in the heart. Knowledge of someone implies an intimate understanding. So, we sheep need to engage more than just our heads; we also need to get to know God in our hearts.

We deepen our relationship with our Good Shepherd in the same way we do so with anyone else. We need to spend time with our shepherd, talk to our shepherd; tell our shepherd about the things we love, the things we are frightened of and the things we struggle with. We need to learn the characteristics of our shepherd so that we can recognise them when we experience them. We need to find out about our shepherd through reading, study or talking with others who know the shepherd well. It also helps if we become a member of a flock whose joy in loving and serving those around them proclaims that they know good shepherding and they are sharing with others the love that they know.

2. Listen to the Good Shepherd

Jesus said that a characteristic of his sheep is that they know his voice, and that, knowing his voice, his sheep listen to him. We live in a noisy world, but listening is a skill that can be learnt. We can listen for our shepherd in our prayer time, spending at least as long being still and silent with God as we spend in talking. St Benedict calls this 'listening with the ear of the heart'. Some people do it through meditation, some people do it when they are walking along the beach. Some find that the place they most readily hear their shepherd's voice is while they are tinkering in the shed, or working in the garden, chopping wood or washing dishes. No matter how each of us does

this, it is vital that we learn how to be quiet so that we can know and listen to the voice of God.

3. Follow the Good Shepherd

Sheep like to follow. When we are following the Good Shepherd, no matter what our path is like, we can trust that our way is being prepared for us.

For each of us life holds challenges that can make us feel lost and alone; things happen that leave us feeling confused, tragedies occur that make no sense to us, we experience loss and grief. Our current enforced isolation is providing a challenge to the mental and emotional health of many. There are times when following our shepherd can feel pointless.

But, the promise of our Good Shepherd is to stay with us, love and guide us, no matter what. This does not take away the pain of life, but it does allow for that pain to be reshaped in a way that brings meaning and hope rather than bitterness and despair. Abundant life is not life that has been protected from sorrow and hardship. Abundant life is life that can find a way to rejoice through the tears of being human, because we know that our Good Shepherd is with us and will never leave us alone.

At times, it is difficult to know whether or not it is the Good Shepherd we are following or whether perhaps we are being led astray by our own sheepish desires or having the wool pulled over our eyes by a not-very-good shepherd! Because sheep are gregarious animals, being part of a flock can help at those times. Other sheep will have experiences and wisdom that we do not; they will have different points of view, different skills and different ways of knowing and understanding the Good Shepherd. Committing to a flock helps us to follow our shepherd and stay on the path of growth and fulfilment, entering into abundant life.

In this season of Easter, we are even more aware than usual that our Good Shepherd loves us and is prepared to give up life itself for us. He doesn't do this because we are clever or good, he does it because we are his sheep. Because of his love for us he will lead us, if we will follow, seek us when we get lost, rejoice when he finds us, no matter what we have done, and carry us, close to his heart, back to the place where we belong.

The Lord be with you.