

Homily for people and parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 21st April 2024, Easter 4 – ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’

Readings: **Acts 4:5-12**

1John 3:16-23

Psalm 23

John 10:11-18

In Australia the great majority of us are not involved in farming sheep. We get our lamb from Woolies, and sing nostalgically about jumbuks, without any real sense of what it means to be a shepherd. When we look for political leaders we don't necessarily think of people from the sheep industry and most political leadership in Australia seems to have a background in law. A local exception would be Lawrence Springborg, former leader of the opposition in State Government and current mayor of Goondiwindi. Mr Springborg knows a great deal about the business of farming sheep!

In the Old Testament there are some very significant leaders who started their lives as shepherds. These include the founding fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and, Moses who looked after the flocks of his father in law, Jethro. King David, the youngest son of Jesse, was looking after his father's sheep when the prophet Samuel came to anoint a new leader, ...and, the theory seems to have been that if someone was able to look after sheep, they could look after people. If they could lead sheep from one place to another to ensure that they had enough to eat and drink; that they could protect them from predators and rescue them when they lost their way... Then, surely, they could do the same for people!

In the much-loved words of Psalm 23 even God is likened to a shepherd. A God who ensures that there is green pasture and water; who leads in times of scarcity, and plenty; who can be trusted, and who will protect from harm; and who will ensure that goodness and mercy are present throughout the journey of human existence.

It comes as no surprise then that the twenty third Psalm is one of the most popular readings at funerals – even for those who do not want a ‘religious’ service. As human beings we want to be cared for in this life, and in whatever comes next, so God as ‘Shepherd’ is been a reassuring metaphor.

In this week's Gospel reading Jesus affirmed that he was the Good Shepherd. To a community very familiar with raising sheep; familiar with Old Testament leaders who had a shepherding background; and grounded in an understanding that God was their shepherd, Jesus said, ‘I am... the Good Shepherd’.

The ‘I am’ preface is important because there is in this a deliberate reference to the way Exodus names God to Moses at a bush that appeared to be burning. In this encounter Moses expressed reluctance to go back to Egypt and asked for the name of the one who was sending him. God is remembered responding, ‘Tell the Israelites **‘I am’** has sent me to you’.

In John's Gospel Jesus describes himself seven times with the preface, ‘I am’, and in this there is identification with the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Israel. Jesus is remembered saying, ‘**I am** the bread of life...’; ‘**I am** the light of the world...’; ‘**I am** the gate...’; ‘**I am** the resurrection, and the life...’; ‘**I am** the way, the truth, and the life...’; ‘**I am** the true vine...’; and, ‘**I am**... the Good Shepherd.’

The Gospel explains that a Good Shepherd is courageous and willing to sacrifice their own life in order that the sheep be protected. It's hard for us to imagine being a shepherd in that time defending sheep against wolves, lions, bears... and thieves, with no dogs to warn of danger, and no guns to kill safely from a distance...

It reminds me of stories shared by South Sudanese friends who remember their childhood responsibilities before civil war tore apart their families and their way of life. As boys they had no computer games or cricket training, but they had the responsibility to protect their family's cattle and goats against lions, leopards, and... Murule raiders! (*pronounced: Moo-roo-lay!*)

In the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel there is an additional quality that can be attributed to the Good Shepherd for in this parable of the lost sheep the shepherd not only cares for the sheep that are healthy, but also for those who are lost. There is even a hint in the parable that the Good Shepherd has a particular concern and priority for those who are lost and struggling.

In exploring the metaphor of 'Good Shepherd' we can recognise parallels in the life of Christ. Jesus was the one willing to give his life; Jesus was the one who repeatedly cared for 'the lost'; and, Jesus is, we believe, the one who calls us each to follow.

It can be reassuring to think of ourselves as shepherds, guided by God to help others, because we imagine ourselves to be powerful. Somehow, WE have what THEY need! However, it's important to keep in mind that in calling God 'Shepherd', and in understanding Jesus as our Good Shepherd, we are likening ourselves to sheep... who are not the brightest of creatures!

We like to think of ourselves as independent and autonomous individuals, who are accountable only to legal authorities, and we may have a good sense of our 'right' to education and health care; housing and vehicles; work and leisure... even when many struggle and are overwhelmed.

The Gospel suggests that 'the sheep' know, and listen, to the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd and they NEED him. There is a much-needed humility in this which acknowledges we don't know everything – even when we have Google on our phones, and money in the bank! In thinking of ourselves as sheep there is an acknowledgement somehow that we each need faith in Christ to flourish. Perhaps it could be suggested that we need Jesus to be our true north.

In accepting the metaphor of sheep there is a helpful reminder we are not solo operators but are part of a flock in which there is interdependence; and that what happens to one part of the flock, sooner or later, will have an impact on the rest of us.

I think prayer is an essential way for us to sustain the relationship between sheep and shepherd. For it is through spoken prayer that we bleat our needs to God, and the needs of the world; and it is in silent, listening prayer that we hear the guiding voice of the shepherd.

In God's grace may it ever be so... in your life and mine!

As I close, would you please join with me now in prayer:

Loving God, we give thanks that you meet us in sacred word and remind us of our need for you. We give thanks for your loving presence and provision and ask for your blessing on all in our world who long for these things. Help us to recognise your voice in the the coming week; recognise the flock you have called us to be part of; and trust you... even when the ground is dry and dusty. We pray in the name of our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.